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THE COMPASSIONATE GOD

Edited by

Sebastian Painadath

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A JOURNAL OF CHRISTIAN INTERPRETATION

The Compassionate God

Edited by

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Editorial

Two basic factors which characterise Asian reality of life are poverty and plurality. Theological reflections in the Asian countries constantly confront these two factors: the poverty of the people and the plurality of religions. The fundamental theological question that arises in the existential context of Asia is this: What is the face of God, being born in the womb of Asia? Which dimension of the divine mystery is appealing to the heart of the Asian people? All religious traditions of Asia seem to communicate the experience of a compassionate God. The poor of all religions seem to take refuge in the divine power of compassion embodied in Siva or Krishna, Jesus or the Buddha, in the words of the Biblical prophets or of Mohammed, or in the compassionate power of cosmic harmony. The Asian people's experience of a compassionate God makes them less aggressive and sensitive to the motherly embrace of their religious psyche. Believers of diverse Asian religions seem to meet at this experience of the Divine. Deep within the divergences of *religious* pursuits one can notice convergent lines of a transforming *spiritual* experience of the divine compassion.

However each religion at the level of its core experience perceives the divine compassion with a specific intensity and in a unique way. It is important to pay attention to this, so that the dialogue between believers of different religions in Asia becomes a deeply enriching experience in the midst of the struggles of life. Each one meets the compassionate God in her/his life and shares this experience with their brothers and sisters in their common pilgrimage.

This issue of *Jeevadharma* is an attempt to get at these convergent and divergent lines in the experience of the compassionate God. As Christian theologians the authors focus attention on the Cross: the manifestation of the mystery of God's suffering. They meditate not on the 'being' but on the 'becoming' of the Divine, not on the omnipotence but on the kenosis of God, not on the transcendent Lordship of Christ, but on his radical being-with-us (Emmanuel) on the path of human suffering. These

Christological reflections are not meant in any way to present the Christian experience as the absolute norm for others, but to share with others how the divine compassion that has been embodied in Jesus Christ reveals the face of a God who is really compassionate, i.e., suffering with us.

Sebastian Painadath

FR. SAMUEL RAYAN

Fr. Samuel Rayan needs no introduction to our readers. He is one of the Founder-members of *Jeevadharma* and has been from the start the Editor of the Section: 'The Living Christ'. He has completed twentyfive years of very fruitful service with his rich contributions.

The poet and theologian in him had always something new to say and he said it always in a beautiful way. With his wide and integral vision of life in all its aspects there is hardly any topic that has escaped his keen eyes and embellished touches. Out of this overall vision on life comes his predilection for People's Theology which, in Rayan's own words, "comes to birth, when people wake up to the truth of their condition, develop a critical consciousness, discern between justice and injustice, recognize their own dignity and their vocation to live as God's friends and co-operators in the fashioning of the New Age".

Rayan's life, his word and work, his writings in various forms, have all contributed not a little to developing this critical consciousness in the people and arousing in them the awareness of the 'Reality that is at work with us and through us to make the night yield stars, the coal yield diamonds and the muddy pond lotus flowers'. This 'new earth and new heaven' has ever been *Jeevadharma's* hope and prayer.

Fr. Rayan is retiring from the editorial responsibility and Fr. Sebastian Painadath, Director of *Sameeksha*, is taking over as the Editor of the Section. We profusely thank Fr. Rayan for all the services he has been rendering which cannot be requited. But then he continues to contribute and is still on the *Jeevadharma* team. Fr. Painadath is relatively young, competent and well accomplished in the work.

General Editor

A Dice Playing God

Paul Thelekat raises with Whitehead the problem of the incompatibility between faith in the almighty God and the reality of evil in creation. 'The power of God within the cosmos is not of a coercive force of omnipotence but a persuasive power of initial and final aim'. Seen in this way God is 'fellow sufferer'. Only a God who suffers with us can redeem us from evil.

Alfred North Whitehead (1861-1947) who was son of an Anglican Pastor, came out of his agnostic silence with a question: "Today there is but one religious dogma in debate; what do you mean by God?"¹ He rejected the traditional God-talk primarily because of the age old problem of theodicy. He contended that the God of classical theodicy (*theos — dike*) does not justify God before the existence of evil.

The chapter on God specially added to his Lowell lectures when given for publication concludes thus: "Among medieval and modern philosophers, anxious to establish the religious significance of God, an unfortunate habit has prevailed of paying Him metaphysical compliments. He has been conceived as the foundation of the metaphysical situation with its ultimate activity. If this conception be adhered to, there can be no alternative except to discern in Him the origin of all evils as well as of all good. He is then the supreme author of the play, and to Him must therefore be ascribed its shortcomings as well as its success."²

One of the very important medieval philosophers who still holds great influence in catholic theology and who according to Whitehead paid metaphysical compliments to God is St. Thomas Aquinas. In Thomistic philosophy the metaphysical absolute is the *Ipsum Esse subsistens* — the very self-subsisting being. This ultimate of philosophical reasoning is identified with or better called God — "Hoc Omnes dicunt Deum" — this all men call God.³

1. *Religion in the Making*, New York, 1926, p. 66 (RW)

2. *Science and the Modern World*, New York, 1925, p. 179²(SMW).

3. This is how each of the five ways of St. Thomas ends. *Summa Theologiae*, 1. 2. 3.

The metaphysical absolute is the condition of possibility of activity in the world. The cosmological situation of being and becoming is made possible by the ultimate *Esse*. If every activity is the flowering of this sole principle, then activity which is orderly or disorderly, in place or out of place, good or bad has to be rooted in the same principle. Hence if this ultimate is identified with the religious ultimate of God, then there is no logical way of absolving God from the complicity of evil. This has been nakedly exposed by David Hume.

"Why is there any misery at all in the world? Not by chance, surely. From some causes then. Is it from the intention of the Deity? But he is perfectly benevolent. Is it contrary to his Intention? But he is almighty."⁴

The key words here are 'chance', 'benevolent' and 'almighty'. God's ethical benevolence and metaphysical ultimacy of omnipotence stand logically incompatible. Once God is metaphysical absolute with omnipotence, there is no room for chance and freedom. This would undermine God's hallowed holiness of benevolent goodness.

Albert Einstein excluded any notion of chance both from his cosmology and from his cosmic religion. So he said: "I, at any rate, am convinced that He is not playing dice".⁵ Holding on to the notion of strict causality in the world he refused to "entertain the idea of a being who interferes in the cause of events".⁶ Hence Einstein's God has no commerce not only in the cosmological realm but also in the human soul of thought, feeling and aspiration. His God is totally unrelated to this world and its affairs. So he wrote: "... if this being is omnipotent then every occurrence, including every human action, every human thought, and every human feeling and aspiration is also His work; how is it possible to think of holding men responsible for their deeds and thoughts before such an almighty Being? In giving out punishments and rewards he would to certain extent be passing judgement on Him-

4. *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, X.

5. Albert Einstein, *The Born-Einstein Letters: Correspondence between Albert Einstein and Max and Hedwig Born, From 1916 to 1955*, (trans. Irene Born) New York, 1971, p. 91.

6. Albert Einstein, *Cosmic Religion*, New York, 1931, p. 27.

self. How can this be combined with goodness and righteousness ascribed to him".⁷

In this context it would not be unfair to remark that Whitehead's system of cosmology compromises on the attribute of omnipotence to safeguard God's holiness and cosmological situation permitting a fair amount of chance. This he does mainly by distinguishing metaphysical and religious absolutes.

The metaphysical absolute in the system is called creativity. But creativity according to him is qualified by what he calls the Principle of Limitation. "Restriction is the price of value"⁸, wrote Whitehead, "the course of events should have developed amid an antecedent limitation composed of conditions, particularisation, and standards of value"⁹. "Some particular *how* is necessary."¹⁰ The world in which we live, activity is not chaotic but is qualified by a Principle of order and harmony, thereby achieving value. This Principle of Limitation Whitehead calls God. "What further can be known about God must be sought in the region of particular experience, and therefore rests on empirical basis."¹¹

Two observations are in order with respect to Whiteheadian distinction of two absolutes. 1) The need of this distinction is also felt by other thinkers. Martin Heidegger is a case in point. He wrote: "Das Sein das ist nicht Gott"¹². "The thinker utters Being, the poet names what is holy"¹³. However he maintained that the thinker and the poet dwell near to one another on the remotest mountains. John Maquarrie interpreting Heidegger wrote: "We could, however, say that 'God' is synonymous with holy being"¹⁴. The assumption is that God cannot be called being in an unqualified way.

2) Unlike Einstein, Whitehead thinks that God plays dice. Contemporary Physics demonstrates that we are not having a mechanistic universe of Newtonian laws alone. Chance and indeterminism are after all part of the cosmological situation. The arrow of time moves not by the force of deterministic laws alone

7. *The Born-Einstein Letters*, p. 27.

8. SMW 178

9. *Ibid.*

10. *Ibid.*

11. *Ibid.*

12. "Briefuber den Humanismus", in *Wegmarken*, Frankfurt am Main, 1978, p. 328.

13. "What is Metaphysics", *Existence and Being*, London, 1956, p. 19.

14. *Principles of Christian Theology*, London, 1966, p. 185.

but by lucky or unlucky probabilities of statistical laws. The second law of thermodynamics points to the increasing entropy, i. e., increase in disorder, decay and death. In other words there is a steady slip from order to chaos. However together with this apparently irreversible laws of entropy the cosmic reality exhibits a process that from apparent disorder higher grades of order and complexity arise.

Ilya Prigogine wrote: "What significance does the evolution of a living being have in the world described by thermodynamics, a world of ever increasing disorder? What is the relationship between thermodynamic time, a time headed toward equilibrium, and the time in which evolution toward increasing complexity is occurring? Was Bergson right? Is time the very medium of innovation or is nothing at all?"¹⁵

Nobel laureate for Physiology / Medicine (1967) Professor George Wald tries to give the evident answer: "It has occurred to me lately—I must confess with some shock at first to my scientific sensibilities—that both questions might be brought into some degree of congruence. This is with the assumption that mind, rather than emerging as a late outgrowth in the evolution of life, has existed always as the matrix, the source and condition of physical reality—that the stuff of which physical reality is composed is mind-stuff".¹⁶

That mental pole which is the necessary matrix of physical reality, Whitehead calls the Principle of Limitation, named God. The power of God within the cosmos is not of a coercive force of Omnipotence but a persuasive power of initial and final aim. In other words it is the power of the "Solitary man on the cross" whose "brief Galilean Vision of humility" "flickered throughout the ages, uncertainly"¹⁷. This Galilean vision "does not emphasise the ruling Ceasar nor the ruthless moralist of the unmoved mover. It dwells on the tender elements in the world which slowly and quietly operates by love" and "love neither rules, nor is it unmoved". God is "the poet of the world with tender patience

15. Ilya Prigogine and Isabelle Stengers, *Order out of Chaos*, 1984, p. 129.

16. Henry Maeght and Roy Abraham Varghese (ed.), *Cosmos, Bios, Theos*, La Salle, Illinois. 1992, p. 219.

17. *Process and Reality; An Essay in Cosmology*, New York, Free Press, 1929, p. 520 (PR).

leading it by his vision of truth, beauty and goodness"¹⁸. In this patient persuasion God is not always victorious. "The worship of God is not a rule of safety"¹⁹ because "chance is a real and major case of our suffering"²⁰. "There is no reason to hold that confusion is less fundamental than is order."²¹

In spite of God's persuasion, tragedy can occur either by chance or by moral fault. In the case of moral evil God's persuasion of grace is willingly rejected and according to Whitehead God suffers defeat for the time being. So Whitehead wrote: "Ascription of mere happiness and of arbitrary power to the nature of God is a profanation"²². "God is the great companion, the fellow-sufferer who understands."²³ For Charles Hartshorne "The old heresy of a suffering deity is no heresy"²⁴. "God suffers our evil acts."²⁵

It could be asked, what does process thought achieve by apparently compromising on traditional theology? The following three observations may clarify.

1) As already pointed out, Whitehead by refusing to pay metaphysical compliments²⁶ to God considers God simply as the principle of Limitation. "A doctrine of God as supreme agency of compulsion"²⁶ is alien to Whitehead. This absolves God from any moral responsibility in the origination of evil.

2) The God of persuasive power suffers a temporary set back in the event of evil which is solely the work of free moving agents who do not heed the divine persuasion. In such tragedy God suffers a Golgotha. That God suffers is the hope of redemption from evil. For, He knows evil as evil. He is persecuted: 'why do you persecute me?' God who is the eternal is the ground of every possibility. He gives possibility to overcome evil.

18. PR 520.

19. SMW 192.

20. Charles Hartshorne, "Whitehead and Berdyaev: Is there Tragedy in God?" *The Journal of Religion*, 372 (1957), p. 74.

21. A. N. Whitehead, *Modes of Thought*, New York, 1938, p. 50.

22. "Immortality", P. Schilpp (ed.), *The Philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead*, La Salle (ILL.), 1951, p. 697.

23. PR 532.

24. Charles Hartshorne, *The Logic of Perfection and Other Essays in Neo-classical Metaphysics*, La Salle (ILL.), 1962, p. 44.

25. C. Hartshorne, "Whitehead's Idea of God", P. Schilpp (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 553.

26. A. N. Whitehead, *Adventures of Ideas*, New York, 1933, p. 213.

The eternal has time, patience and possibility to overcome the fleeting evil. However because God knows the fickle moments of the trial and tragedy, they get everlasting significance.

3) After naming the principle of Limitation what further Whitehead speaks about God depends on "the region of particular experiences". "Christ gave his life. It is for the christians to discern the doctrine."²⁷ "The basis of all authority is the supremacy of fact over thought."²⁸ The authoritative facts of christian theology is the crucified Christ. Crucifix stands as the justification of God (theodicy) before evil. God suffers because God made a world of free agents. Permitting freedom is permitting tragedy and triumph. St. Gregory of Nyssa considers the whole world process as the play of the second Person of the Trinity. St. Chrysostom wrote: *ubi caritas gaudet, ibi est festivitas*. The whole cosmic dance is a festivity out of love. But that activity involves tragedy, because love suffers and it overcomes.

Sathyadeepam
Cochin

Paul Thalekat

27. RM 55.

28. A. N. Whitehead, *The Function of Reason*, Princeton, 1929, p. 80.

The Compassionate God of the Bible

Corona Mary scans through biblical texts and portrays the compassionate—motherly face of the Divine. Compassion as the willingness 'to love the seemingly unlovable' is the demand placed on all those who believe in the God of the biblical revelation. This however cannot be reconciled with the behaviour patterns of 'dominance, manipulation, control, rationalism and linear logic'—all androgenic traits prevalent in the Church. Corona makes very challenging observations on the need of a radical metanoia in the christian communities in this regard.

The compassionate God of Israel

Year after year, Israel with her hands filled with first-fruits, stood in the presence of Yahweh and in words full of pathos confessed her faith in her compassionate God:

"A wandering Aramean was my father and he went down into Egypt and sojourned there, few in number; and there he became a nation, great, mighty and populous. And the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us and laid upon us hard bondage. Then we cried to the Lord, the God of our fathers and the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil and our oppression and the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm ..." (Deut. 26: 5-8).

Thus from their very origin as a people, Israel's experience was that she belonged to a God who saw her affliction, heard her cry, knew her suffering and came down to deliver her (Ex. 3: 7-8). God's compassion expressed in the election and deliverance of Israel is an essential part of her faith experience.

The Divine Self-disclosure

If in the core of Israel's faith was the experience of the compassionate God who feels for them, the Divine self-disclosure emphasises it to a fault.

"The Lord passed before him and proclaimed, "The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and

abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin..." (Ex. 34: 6-7)

Such a self-revelation on the part of Yahweh soon after the golden calf event is of momentous significance. He had just saved Israel from the oppression of Egypt, working great wonders and signs. But as soon as Moses [had gone from them to speak to Yahweh, they made a golden calf, celebrated a feast for it and prostrated before it saying that that calf was the God who brought them from Egypt. Such apostasy made Moses break the tablets of the decalogue. At this juncture, when Yahweh had every right to destroy this people, comes this beautiful revelation. He makes a proclamation of His compassion almost apologetically, defending His readiness to give a second set of tablets to replace the first that was destroyed. Israel took maximum advantage of such compassion by playing the rebel time and again. At the same time she banked on such divine mercy for her survival.

Yahweh's steadfast love

In the history of religions, Israel stands apart with her unique experience of a God who entered into covenant with the people and made them His own. Though conscious of her unworthiness, she could never shed her pride in such divine alliance. In the most difficult trials, she never felt destitute of rights and claims in her relationship with Yahweh. In the midst of suffering and oppression, she argues:

"Our sufferings proved your holiness to them
let their down-fall prove your glory to us" (Sir 36: 4).

This translation given in the Prayer of the Church explains well the meaning of the given passage. Israel has done wrong and is punished by Yahweh. Seeing that, the other nations are quite impressed by Yahweh's holiness that would not tolerate evil and would punish evil doers even if they are His own people. Though to her own disadvantage, Israel acknowledges it. At the same time she has a claim to see God's glory routing His enemies (Israel's enemies are always understood by the people as God's enemies). The prayer for deliverance is not centered on her suffering but on God who in His compassion has taken responsibility for her. This is the beauty of most of Israel's prayer.

"Do not deliver the soul of thy dove
to the wild beast" (Ps 74: 19).

Such verses strike a deep chord in the heart of every one who prays them because of the tenderness of relationship they contain.

Israel's History: a Divine-human love-story

The covenant relationship between the compassionate God and the stiff-necked people is the most beautiful love-story ever written. Fully conscious of their claims, given them by the One who is ever "steadfast in love" they ask Him confidently:

"Keep me as the apple of the eye
hide me in the shadow of thy wings" (Ps 17: 8).

Israel's lover-God could never be aloof in His transcendence. He was very much involved in their life. He was their king, judge, military general, teacher, father, in short, the head of every department of their life. The Bible makes us understand that Israel's personal and national life was centered around Yahweh, and for Yahweh Israel seems to be an obsession.

"And who is a rock except our God?
the God who girded me with strength
and made my way safe
He made my feet like hind's feet
and set me secure on the heights." (Ps 18: 31-33)

Yahweh does the work of the military instructor for the benefit of His people.

"He trains my hands for war
so that my arms can bend a bow of bronze." (Ps. 18: 34)

He was expected to fight their battles, not only those the nation was engaged in but also those of the individuals.

"Contend O Lord with those who contend with me
fight against those who fight against me." (Ps. 35: 1-3)

Yahweh even worked for Israel as a watch man.

"... he who keeps you will not slumber
Behold, he who keeps Israel
will neither slumber nor sleep." (Ps. 121: 3-4)

Israel believed through experience that even if she was unfaithful to the covenant repeatedly, Yahweh in His steadfast love was under promise not to destroy her completely.

"Yet being compassionate
forgave their iniquity
and did not destroy them

... He remembered that they were but flesh." (Ps. 78: 38-39)

Israel was quite conscious that her greatness was due to her relationship with God who in His compassion had put Himself under contract to defend her and see to her well-being.

"Thou didst make me the head of the nations
people whom I had not known served me

as soon as they heard of me they obeyed me." (Ps. 18: 43-44)

If there was anything of God that was indelibly etched in the heart of Israel, it was the Divine compassion. Israel was so sure of it that she could even claim God's seeking her when she went astray.

"I have gone astray like a lost sheep:
seek thy servant." (Ps. 119: 176)

Holiness prompts him to punish his people when they do evil so that they are brought to repentance and turn to Him. But soon compassion takes over and He is full of inviting love. In the book of Isaiah He looks at his people broken and wounded. The divine compassionate eyes dwell on the brokenness and with tears in His voice Yahweh groans.

"Why will you still be smitten
that you continue to rebel?
The whole head is sick
and the whole heart faint.
From the sole of the foot even to the head
there is no soundness in it,
but bruises and sores
and bleeding wounds..." (Is. 1: 5-6)

and He invites them to come to Him for healing and cleansing.

"Come now let us reason together
says the Lord:
though your sins are like scarlet,
they shall be as white as snow." (Is. 1: 18)

Israel has only to indulge in some morose thinking such as "The Lord has forsaken me, the Lord has forgotten me", out comes the divine proclamation revealing the flood of compassion which is His very Being.

"Can a woman forget her sucking child
that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb?
Even if these may forget, yet I will not forget you.
Behold I have graven you in the palm of my hands."
(Is. 49:15-16)

Like an infatuated lover, he declares that he would do anything for His beloved Israel, even suspending the natural qualities of the cosmic elements.

"When you pass through the waters
I will be with you
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you.
When you walk through fire you shall not be burned
and the flame shall not consume you." (Is. 43:2)

Yahweh's compassion finds a new expression in the divine lamentation in the book of Hosea.

"My people are bent on turning away from me:

.....
How can I give you up, O Ephraim!
How can I hand you over Israel!
How can I make you like Admah!
How can I treat you like Zeboiim!
My heart recoils within me,
my compassion grows warm and tender." (Hosea 11:7-8)

It is as though Yahweh was in conflict within Himself — His holiness demanding that Israel be punished and His compassionate heart melting with love for His stupid errant child. In this conflict compassion puts in the shade every other attribute of God.

Compassion, the nature of Divine Mother

The experience of divine compassion gives Israel, in her relationship with God, a freedom that is quite amazing. She can kick and leap and jump around but all within the divine womb of compassion. In fact the Hebrew word for compassion *rāḥam*, according to the New Bible Dictionary, may share common origin with *reḥem* meaning womb. So it could mean the feeling a mother has for the baby in her womb or the sisterly, brotherly feeling among those who shared the same womb. In the Bible both meanings receive emphasis.

Because Israel is the recipient of Yahweh's motherly compassion, the divine Mother who bore them in Her womb demands

from her people that they show brotherly / sisterly compassion among themselves and for others, because all have shared the same divine womb. So in the Tora and later in the prophets, justice and compassion are central.

"You shall not pervert justice due to the sojourner or to the fatherless or take a widow's garment in pledge; but you shall remember that you were a slave in Egypt and the Lord your God redeemed you from there; therefore I command you to do this.

When you reap your harvest in your field and have forgotten a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it; it shall be for the sojourner, the fatherless and the widow; that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands. When you beat your olive trees you shall not go over the boughs again; it shall be for the sojourner, the fatherless and the widow. When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, you shall not glean it afterward. It shall be for the sojourner, the fatherless and the widow. You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt; therefore I command you to do this." (Deut. 24: 17-22)

Summing it all up comes the terse command: "you shall not oppress a stranger; you know the heart of a stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Ex. 23: 9).

Jesus, the manifestation of Divine compassion

Jesus' life on earth was a self-declaration, 'He who sees me, sees my father'. He was an embodiment of God's compassion and the manifestation of God who sees the affliction, toil and the oppression and comes down to liberate them. Following the prophetic tradition of Israel, his compassion towards the oppressed made him issue a renewed call to the oppressors to do justice towards their brothers and sisters.

Compassion towards the marginalised

Jesus' compassion towards the marginalised and untouchables of the earth is a beacon for all Christians who want to live truly as the disciples of Christ. The untouchable leper is touched with great tenderness and healed. He invites those who were denied table-fellowship by the Jews and almost with a political flare prepares himself to eat with them in the sight of a big crowd. His options are clear. But his compassion towards women is

unparalleled, because the oppression also is unparalleled. A Buddhist monk, when asked what was the uniqueness of Christianity, said that Christ was the unique religious Guru who was remarkably sensitive to the sufferings of women and not only showed them compassion but gave them equal status with his men disciples.

Marginalised women and Jesus

In the Old Testament, Yahweh, declaring his love for the broken-down Israel says:

“I gave Egypt as your ransom
Ethiopia and Seba in exchange for you
Because you are precious in my eyes,
and honoured and I love you” (Is. 43: 3-4).

Any one who is not familiar with the choices divine compassion makes, may wonder which blind deity can prefer this seminomadic, primitive tribe to the highly civilised nations of Egypt, Ethiopia and Seba. But Jesus' choices are no less striking. He not only prefers a woman sinner to a pharisee but also shows in parable and other sayings that she is a better Jew than the Pharisee who in spite of his strict observance of the law, did not observe the Jewish custom in receiving a guest; where as the woman, though despised by others as one who broke the law, followed that custom in a pre-eminent way.

Deliverance from oppressive customs

In the episode of the woman with a hemorrhage for twelve years, many see only a miracle of healing. But it is much more than that. The levitical law forbade such women from touching anything or any one (Lev. 15: 25-27). The compassionate Jesus sees in this woman not only a sick person but a sister who was reduced to the status of a dirty thing kept away from contact with people for years. He is angry with such a dehumanising custom and expresses his option for the dignity of human life by making public the fact that she touched him and others by pushing past the crowd. The healing puts the seal of his approval on her behaviour.

Deliverance from perverted application of the Law

In the gospel according to John, we find the episode of the woman caught in adultery (Jn. 8: 2-11). Jesus first refuses to

speak to the scribes and the pharisees who accuse the woman. After repeated requests, comes the divine verdict:

"Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her" (Jn. 8: 7).

What was this challenge aimed at? Jesus with his clear understanding of the law, knew very well that they had perverted the Law and had let go many a sinner just as they had done then. The Law is very clear about stoning to death both the man and woman who had committed adultery.

"If a man is found lying with the wife of another man, both of them shall die, the man who lay with the woman and the woman." (Deut. 22: 22)

"If a man commits adultery with the wife of his neighbour, both the adulterer and the adulteress shall be put to death." (Lev. 20: 10)

In John, the scribes and the pharisees say "this woman has been caught in the act of adultery". The compassionate heart of Jesus is pained at this gross injustice of applying the censure of the law only to the powerless and the voiceless. If they had caught her in the act of adultery, certainly, there was the man too. For how many centuries such distorted application of law perpetuated injustice in Israel! When they were guilty of such gross injustice how could they claim this woman's life on the basis of their great zeal for preserving God's Law! Jesus made them look into their own attitude towards the Law. Belonging to a class that boasts in the knowledge and observance of law, they understood and dropped their stones.

Liberation from gender roles

The compassionate heart of Jesus rebels against the social custom of denying women intellectual and spiritual status and reducing their activity to the kitchen. In Luke 10: 38-42, Martha is the symbol of the traditional role of woman, serving the preacher by cooking for him. Mary on the other hand represents discipleship in the fullest sense. Jesus could sit and speak with her about his vision and mission. He would not allow her to be dragged into the traditional role. His approval of the emerging role of woman as one who could receive and reflect on a new religious vision is obvious. "Mary has chosen the good portion which shall not be taken away from her." (Lk. 10: 42) To see in these

two women as later theologians did, the images of active and contemplative forms of life and infer that Jesus commanded contemplative form is anachronistic. At the time of the evangelist, Christian life was not yet dichotomised into active and contemplative forms.

Justice and compassion

In the above examples Jesus shows his understanding of compassion namely elevating each person to the awareness of the inviolable dignity as a human person and to recognise the dignity of the other in human relationship. That is why in God, justice and compassion are synonyms. This also explains how Jesus the compassionate one could be unrelenting towards oppressors, though they showed themselves to be the strict observers of the law. In this Jesus is being very faithful to Yahweh's self-revelation in the Old Testament.

"Why have we fasted, and thou seest it not? ... Behold, in the day of your fast you seek your own pleasure and oppress all your workers. Behold, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and hit with wicked fist ... Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?" (Is. 58: 3-6)

Compassion as good relationship

Among human persons, if relationship is to be lasting then each one should be very generous in showing compassion. Inability to sympathise with others and understand the feelings of others are major offenses among the children of the compassionate God. Who could ever have thought of a story such as the prodigal son except Jesus, the human mirror of the compassionate God? Who could have painted the picture of God who forgives sins so readily except His son who is in the bosom of the Father? Who else could have placed the repentant prodigal feasting with the father while the righteous son is outside the house in impotent anger, born of inability to accept his brother and the incapacity to enter into the feelings of both the father and the son.

Compassion as loving the seemingly unlovable

Ezekiel has a very deeply moving narrative about the origin of Israel. Israel owes its existence to Yahweh who showed compassion when she was most pathetic looking.

"As for your birth, on the day you were born your navel string was not cut, nor were you washed with water to cleanse you, nor rubbed with salt, nor swathed with bands. No eye pitied you, to do any of these things to you out of compassion for you; but you were cast out on the open field, for you were abhorred, on the day that you were born.

And when I passed by you, and saw you weltering in your blood, I said to you in your blood, 'Live and grow up like a plant of the field'. And you grew up and became tall and arrived at full maidenhood." (Ez. 16: 4-7)

When we read passages like this, we feel like asking how deep must be the divine compassion to descend so low before the creatures. Jesus, the human expression of divine compassion laments,

"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings and you would not" (Matt. 23: 37).

The Present Climate

When we reflect on the depth of God's compassionate love we understand that refusing to believe in God's love and forgiveness is the greatest insult to God. When we see Jesus on the cross not only forgiving those who were responsible for the crucifixion but also pleading with God that they do not know what they are doing, how can any one despair of divine forgiveness. Perhaps if quite a number of people are suffering under guilt complex, the reason could be the exclusive father image of God as a disciplinarian. At present, do our catechesis, homilies and retreats show the compassionate face of God in clear relief? The general image the Christian has of God is very different from the Abba experienced and expressed by the one who is in the maternal bosom of the Divine.

The Root cause: Patriarchal values

The root cause has to be found in the patriarchal and androcentric ideology and functioning in the Church. The patriarchal values of dominance, manipulation, control, rationalism and linear logic are counter-productive of compassion as way of life. In such a climate compassionate God is definitely out of place except perhaps for rhetorical purposes. But for the committed

Christian groups especially women who spend their lives bringing hope and joy among the poor, sick and dying, the Church stands identified with efficiency and authority. These women who do reveal the merciful love of God are not included in the official body of the Church. Even among Christian women religious, a big number have imbued the patriarchal values, mistaking them as Christian values so much so that even institutes of religious women follow the paradigms of patriarchy rather than providing the needed counter-cultural correctives.

The Need of the Hour — Metanoia

As long as the patriarchal and androcentric thought/behaviour patterns prevail, the Church will not be able to reveal the compassionate God in its life. I do not mean to say that men cannot be compassionate. What I mean is that it is not a value that is sought after for a meaningful and fulfilled life in a patriarchal society. The values that direct life are the above mentioned which can be summarised in the first one, namely dominance. Ever since the liberative movement of Christ got settled down as a parallel institution in the Roman empire, dominance is the value that wrote the history of expansion, consolidation and administration in the Church. Dominance and compassion cannot be called identical twins!

So faith in compassionate God demands from all men and women a radical metanoia — giving up the patriarchal values and seeking the God of life. It is the need of the hour as the human family is moving towards the 21st century.

Conclusion

As the twentieth century is coming to a close, the world scenario is predominated by a universal religious consciousness proclaiming counter-cultural values. Instead of,

dominance — relationship of equals/manipulation — liberation/control — responsibility sharing / rationalism — wisdom of the heart / linear logic — inclusive consciousness.

The Church with its wonderful spiritual heritage from its Founder can lead the world in the counter-cultural movement. May She the divine Sophia guide us in our journey towards experiencing and expressing the compassionate God of Jesus!

The Compassionate God: a Hindu Perspective

Subhash Anand examines the Saiva, Vaishnava and Sakta traditions of Hinduism and interprets their myths and symbols which articulate the experience of God's compassion. They communicate to the devotees the ardent compassion and redeeming grace of God. But 'the idea of a God who actually suffers with those who are suffering seems to be alien to Hinduism'. God is the 'unaffected actor'. The ultimate reason for this invulnerability of God seems to lie in the dualistic world view according to which the Spirit (purusha) cannot be affected by matter (prakriti).

The word compassionate describes a person who has compassion for others, and compassion can be understood metaphorically—as it is more commonly done, and then it means "sorrow, pity, or sympathy for the sufferings and misfortunes of others, causing a desire to give help or show mercy"¹. But the words compassion (Latin: *compassio*) and sympathy (Greek: *sumpatheia*) have an identical structure and mean to suffer (*pati*, *pathein*) with (*cum*, *sun*) somebody. Hence literally, the compassionate person is one who actually shares in the suffering and pain of the other.

Let me try to explain the difference by some example. A beggar, with absolutely no money with him, comes to a hotel and pleads for some food. The hotel owner is moved by his wretched state and gives him a good meal. The beggar continues his begging round and the next day he approaches a traveller who is having his lunch sitting in the shade of a tree. The latter is on a long journey, and though he too is poor yet he also is touched by the misery of the other and generously offers him half his lunch. Consequently the traveller's hunger is not fully satisfied, and he just does not have enough money to buy more food. The hotel-owner is compassionate—metaphorically: he feels for the beggar. But in

1. P. Procter (chief ed.), *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*, Essex: Longman, rev. ed. 1981, p. 219b.

a hotel where so much food is wasted it would not even cost him anything to give a free meal to somebody once in a way. On the other hand, the poor traveller literally shares in the hunger of the beggar. Now he knows from personal experience what it means to go hungry.

We are painfully aware of the fact that millions and millions of innocent people have suffered and died—and continue to do so—not only in the gas chambers of Nazi Germany, but in other parts of the world. In fact some even think that all this violence is enough evidence to prove that there is no God. Yet many religious traditions not only affirm the existence of God but also speak of him as being very compassionate. In what sense is God compassionate? Does he merely 'feel for us' when we are afflicted or does he also really 'suffer with us', making his own our pain and agony. I shall limit myself to the Hindu point of view, as found in the Śaiva, Vaiṣṇava and Śākta traditions, documented both in Sanskrit and in other texts.

A. The Saiva Tradition

We first find the word *siva* (kind, auspicious) in the *Rgveda* but then it is not yet the name of a particular deity, and is applied only once to Rudra (10.92.9), the Deva who will eventually dominate the Hindu religious stage as Rudra-Śiva. However, the Indus Valley excavations seem to indicate that the cult of Śiva goes as far back as the third millennium before Christ. Though his earlier name—Rudra—evokes fear, yet very early he was considered to be the friend and refuge of all (*sarvasya śaranyam suhṛt*, *Śvetāśvatara-upaniṣad* 3.17)². Subsequently many stories will highlight his compassionate response to people in need³. To help them he appears in different forms, and sometimes even agrees to be their child. Hence later Saiva texts will use the expression *avatāra*, though we do not have full life-accounts as we have for Krṣṇa and Rāma.

2. The *Svetasvatara-upanisad* was composed before the second century B. C.

3. The *Mahabharata* (cr. ed., Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1933-71) tells us that Siva—and he alone could do it (3.107.22)—receives the Ganga on his head so that Bhagiratha could redeem his ancestors (3.108.5). Once Uma playfully closed Siva's eyes. There was darkness and chaos in the whole of creation. Siva opens his third eye to save it from total destruction (13.127.44).

One of the best documents illustrating this trend is the *Satarudra-samhita* of the *Siva-purana*⁴. In its opening invocation, it informs us that Siva indulges in endless sports (*ananta-lila*) and a little later that he has innumerable descents (*asaṅkhyāta-avatara*, 1.4). These *avatars* are to do good (*siva*, 1.1) to pious people. Sometimes he may even come in a human form to test a devotee and in the process appear to suffer, but it is all part of the divine game. Let me give one example of his many such sports (*lila*, 27.8). Once Siva and Pārvati appear as a Brahmin couple to test the virtue of a king. As part of the drama Parvati is carried away by a tiger—which too is part of the drama. Then Siva weeps just like humans do (*laukikagatimaśritya*, 27.20).

Feeling for us

On another occasion, when the Devas and the Asuras were churning the ocean to obtain *amṛta*, *halahala* a very deadly poison emerges and begins to permeate the whole of creation. Siva, who is very much concerned about his devotees (*bhakta-vatsala*) drinks this poison and freely (*sva-icchaya*) retains it in his throat (22.6). The *Bhagavata-purana* gives us a more poignant version of this story.⁵ All creatures take refuge in him who is ever-compassionate (*śada-siva*, 8.7.19). They remind him that he alone (*eka*) can help them for he takes away the pain of those who come to him (*prapanna-arti-hara*, 22). On seeing their plight, Siva is deeply moved with pity (*kṛpaya-bhṛsapiditah*, 36). He reminds his consort that it is the duty of great people to protect the poor (*dina-paripalana*, 38). They even sacrifice their little lives to succour others. He then gathers all the poison in his hand and swallows it out of compassion (*kṛpa*, 42). The narrator of this story reminds us that generally good people are pained by the pain of others (*tavyante lokatapena sadhavah prayasah janah*, 44).

This is one of the most popular episodes forcefully depicting the compassionate nature of Siva. It is also one of the explanations given by the *Mahabharata* of how he became blue-necked (*nilakantha*, var. 274 after 1.16.38). This epithet is also "the most

4. I am following the text as found in *Siva-purana*, ed. P. Kumar, Delhi: Nag Pbs., 1984.

5. I am following *Srimad Bhagavata Mahapurana*, tr. C. L. Goswami, Gorakhpur; Gita Press, 1£71.

lovable name of Siva" in the South⁶, and it is "symbolic of the fact that God is ever intent on saving His creatures from sin and sorrow and He goes to their help the moment they cry to Him"⁷. But the question remains: Did Siva really suffer as a result of drinking that poison? Though that deadly stuff leaves a mark on his throat, the *Bhagavata-purana* informs us that it serves as an ornament (*vibhuṣana*, 8.7.43). Thus this act too appears to be one more of his mighty sports, another display of his power.

The destroying of the three mysterious cities of the three sons of Taraka, an Asura, is another well-known episode from Saiva mythology (*Siva-purana*, *Rudra-samhita*, *Yuddha-khaṇḍa*, 1-12). This too is one of Siva's games (*lila*, 10.13), for he is an expert in great sports (*vara-lila-visarada*, 10.21). These Asuras have received a very special boon: they can be subdued only if their constantly moving celestial dwellings were pierced through with just one arrow. They go about harassing others. The people afflicted by them finally take refuge in Siva. He casts a glance of compassion (*kṛpa-dṛṣṭi*, 6.33) on them, and then playfully (*viharat*, 1.2) destroys the Asuras and their inaccessible cities.

Suffering with us

The *Mahabharata* gives us a story which seems to suggest that by his penance and self-inflicted pain, Siva ensures our well-being (10.17.10-26, summarized). Wishing to create the world, Brahma approached Siva and told him to be quick about his job. Foreseeing the limitations of the creatures to be, Siva immersed himself in water to perform severe penance. The impatient Brahma ordered another of his mind-born agents to undertake the task. As soon as the creatures came into existence, they felt hungry and rushed to devour their creator. Brahma saved him by giving them the plants and weaker animals as food. Emerging from the water, Siva was annoyed to see creation already accomplished. Forthwith he cut off his *linga*, which got rooted in the earth. To Brahma, who is surprised by his action, he said: "Now that creation is already a fact I have no need of the *linga*. But by my penance I have secured food for all". He went away and continued his

6. M. A. Dorai Rangaswamy, *The Religion and Philosophy of Tevaram*⁸ Madras: University of Madras, 1958, p. 268.

7. J. M. Nallaswami Pillai, *St. Sekkilar's Periyapuram*, Madras: Rajan & Co., rep. 1955, p. 6.

penance. The fact that Siva's organ got rooted in the earth simply means that his creative energy pervades the whole of creation and keeps it going. His self-mutilation does not cripple him, and he continues his penance, his creation-supporting activity.

In his great mystical poem *Tiruvasagam*, Manikkavasagar refers to many exploits which Siva, who is like a mother (*tayi*, 4.87) to him, performed at the behest of his devotees.⁸ Once he carried mud on behalf of an old and sickly woman (2.46-47; 8.47) and was struck by the Pandiyan king's servant (13.61-64) as the work assigned was not completed. The *Vathavurar-purana* — a collection of legends about Manikkavasagar — gives us more details about this episode.⁹ The king orders that all the citizens must put in their share of work for building a dam. A poor widow is too old and weak to dig and carry mud, nor does she have any money to pay for a substitute. She prays to Siva. He comes to her aid, taking the form of a young man dressed in rags. He agrees to work for her just for his food. He does his work in a disorderly manner, all the while singing and jumping about like a mad man. Yet the work quota is completed. He has a good meal, and then lies down to sleep on the bank of the river.

The overseers are annoyed by this impudent behaviour. They begin to beat him, but with the very first blow the whole of creation trembles and groans with pain. Just then Siva disappears.¹⁰ Referring to this incident, Manikkavasagar says:

The God with eye in midmost of His brow; in Madura
District, He carried earth for hire,
was smitten by the king.

Sing we His golden form that bore the wounds (8. 46-48).

Thus Siva appears to suffer in the act of helping a needy widow. But the poet also tells us that this also is one of Siva's "magic illusion" (*indrajala*, 2.43).

B. The Vaisnava Tradition

The Vaiṣṇava tradition finds its two most powerful expressions in the cults of Kṛṣṇa and Rāma, the former being quite popular

8. Scholars are not agreed upon the time of Manikkavasagar. Pope thinks "that he lived somewhere about the seventh or eighth century of our era." See G. U. Pope, *The Tiruvasagam*, Madras: Madras University, rep. 1970, p. xvii.

9. This text cannot be dated earlier than 1750 A.D. *Ibid.*, pp. xvii-xviii.

10. *Ibid.*, pp. xxvii-xxviii.

in the whole country and the latter being more prevalent in the Hindi belt.

Krsna: The Supreme Lover

If the cult of Kṛṣṇa is so powerful today it is largely due to the *Bhagavata-purana*, which is a major source and inspiration of much of the subsequent Vaisnava texts in the regional languages. It provides us with a very picturesque account of Kṛṣṇa's life. At his birth as Kṛṣṇa, Viṣṇu appears as a wonder-evoking (*adbhuta*) child in his divine form, with four arms, etc. (10.3.9), for his birth is only an imitation (*vidambana*, 31) of worldly behaviour. He then presents himself as a normal human child (*prakṛta*, 46). His foster mother Yasoda sees the whole of creation in his little mouth (10.7.35-36; 8. 37-38). Once she even tries to tie him with a rope to prevent him from indulging in mischief. The rope is too short, and even though she keeps on adding many pieces to make it longer, it is still not long enough. Seeing her sweating and worn-out, Kṛṣṇa is moved with compassion (*krpa*, 10.9.18) and allows himself to be bound by her.

Already in his childhood, his maternal uncle Kāṁsa sends different agents to kill him, but Kṛṣṇa knows who they are and why they have approached him. Even though these murderers are powerful demons, to kill them is mere child's play for him.¹¹ The *gopis* of Vṛndavan try their best to arouse his passion. Their amorous gestures are so seductive that even Madana, the god of love, faints and drops his bow. Kṛṣṇa, however, remains unmoved (1.11.36). After he has accomplished his mission and instructed his faithful disciple Uddhava, Kṛṣṇa bodily returns to his abode (11.31.5). This account is so different from what we find in the *Mahabharata*, where Kṛṣṇa is reported to have been shot dead by a hunter (16.5.19): a very miserable death for a great warrior!

To understand all what has been said about Kṛṣṇa, it is important to keep in mind the theology underlying this description. God is supremely compassionate (*parama-karunika*, 6.9.33; *karuna-atman*, 7.10.4). He is full of parental affection for his devotees (*bhakta-vatsala*, 1.11.10), eager to bestow his favour

11. Even when Kṛṣṇa touches a demon to kill him, his touch brings deliverance. Thus Pūtana, Trnavarta, Vatsa, Baka, Aga, etc. are some of the demons redeemed by him (10.6, 7, 11, 12).

on them (*anugraha-katara*, 3.28.17; 4.9.17). His heart moves with compassion especially towards those who are afflicted in some way or other (*anukampita-hṛdaya*, 5.24.27; *arta-anukampin*, 4.22.42). His mercy towards the needy is so tender that he can even be moved to tears, tears so abundant so as to fill a lake (3.21.38)! His descent on earth (*avatara*) too is the expression of his grace (*prasada*, 2.7.23) and compassion (*anukampa*, 10.66.5).

According to the *Bhagavata-purana*, the *avatara* is only an apparent human being (*kapaṭa manuṣa*, 1.1.20).¹² Though his human form is merely a play (*līla-nara-vapus*), he goes about imitating the behaviour of humans (*nr-loka-anusilayat*, 10.23.36). He is like an actor on the stage (*nata*, 1.15.35) who freely assumes different roles. He is the unmoved mover, and consequently he can neither be disturbed by passion nor can suffer. If at times he appears to be distressed it is only because his life is meant to be an object-lesson for men (*martya-sikṣana*, 5.19.5). All he does is mere play (*līla*, 1.2.34; *krida*, 3.5.7), a stage-acting. The coming of Visnu as an *avatāra* is similar to a troupe of actors coming to stage a drama: he does not come alone, but is accompanied by his heavenly courtiers, who assume different forms on the earth and thus make the play interesting (10.1.22-25). When an actor cries on the stage he may do it so effectively that some among the audience may be moved to tears. But the actor is only acting out a role. The play may have some villain, who only serves to highlight the greatness of the hero. Hence the more treachery he brings into the scene the more effectively he serves the purpose of the *avatara*, and hence he too is redeemed. If at any moment we have a tragic note, it is heard only by the audience.

Rama: The Ideal Husband

If the cult of Rama is more prevalent in the Hindi belt, it is largely due to Tulasidasa's *Rāmcaritmānas*.¹³ Rama is full of kindness (*kṛpala*) and compassionate to the lowly (*dīnādayala*, 1.192.1).

12. This is a very significant *hapaxlegomenon*: a word occurring only once in the whole of the *Bhagavata-purana*.

13. Here I am following *Sri Ramacharitamanasa*, Gorakhpur: Gita Press, 1976 In citing this text, the first, second and third numbers indicate the book (*kanda*),^{*} the *doha* and the *caupais* appearing immediately before the *doha*. In transliterating Hindi words I am guided by the way they are pronounced, unless they are part of some quotation or are names of persons historical or mythical.

At his birth he appears in a divine form to his mother, who then requests him to abandon that form and to assume a form suitable for childish sport (*sisulila*, 1.192.3). Rama becomes a child and starts crying. During his journey in the forest his fatigue is removed by a bath in Ganga. Tulasidasa reminds his reader that Rama's fatigue is only our way of speaking (*laukika-vyavaharu*, 2.87.4). When Lakṣmaṇa is wounded and Hanuman delays in bringing the medicinal herb Rama, imitating the behaviour of humans (*manuja-anusari*, 6.61.1) expresses his sorrow. In this he is merely exhibiting a human reaction because he is kind to his devotees (*nara-gati bhagata-kṛpala dekhai*, 6.61.9).

The last book of *Rāmcaritmānas* shows Rāma, who is the supreme Ātman and Brahman in a human form (*parama-atma brahma nara-rūpa*, 7.48.4a), retiring to a mango-grove. This is his last act for there is no reference to his death. Then Siva winds up his narration assuring Pārvati that he has narrated to her the full (*saba*, 7.52.1b) story of Rama to the best of his capacity. This has not been an easy task even for Siva, because not only is Rama infinite, but even his qualities, names, births and deeds are endless (7.52.2a). There is no death for our hero, even though he has endless births.

Though on the one hand Kṛṣṇa is shown as having many mistresses and on the other Rama as the faithful husband of one wife, the theology undergirding the two narrations is basically the same: the coming of the *avatāra* is like the coming of a drama troupe. Harassed by demons, Mother Earth assumes the form of a cow and approaches the Devas. With Brahma as their leader, the Devas together plead with Hari (Visnu) to intervene. He assures them that he himself, together with his 'parts' (*amśa*, 1.186.1b), will come to the earth as a child of King Daśaratha. Brahma directs the Devas to assume the body of monkeys and to await the Lord on the earth (1.184-187). Tulasidasa "is anxious to explain that Rama's humanity is not real but merely a conscious exhibition of divine *līla*".¹⁴ He can be compared to a clever actor (*nata*) who, assuming different appearances, acts out many roles, yet himself remaining the same (7.72b). Hence infatuation and confusion (*moha, vimoha*) cannot be his lot because he him-

14. W. D. P. Hill, *The Holy Lake of the Acts of Rama* (Eng. tr. of *Ramcaritmanas*), London: Oxford University Press 1952, p. xxix.

self being pure Being, Consciousness and Bliss (*sat-cid-ananda*) is like the sun, dispelling all darkness (1.116.2b-3a). Just as when people see clouds they think that the sun is affected, so too the ignorant people due to their own confusion (*bhrama*) impute infatuation (*moha*) to Rama (1.117.1).

C. The Sakta Tradition

The cult of the Goddess is found in some way or the other in all parts of India. Though we do come across some texts in Sanskrit that deal with the myths related to some of her manifestations, the cult continues to belong to what may be called the little or the oral tradition. Hence the regional variations are much more numerous and differentiated. Many of her names are not of Sanskrit origin, and this fact also indicates the ancient origin of this cult. Nearly every village will have a little shrine in her honour, and the people there will have their own stock of stories narrating her great deeds. Here we shall analyse two texts: *Devi-mahatmya* belonging to the first millennium of our era,¹⁵ and the poems of Ramaprasada who lived closer to our times.¹⁶

A Compassionate Goddess

The *Devi-mahatmya* portrays the Goddess both as very gentle and also as very frightening (*atisaumya-atiraudra*, 5.11). She has a very gentle appearance (*saumya-vadana*, 11.25). She is present in the whole of creation in the form of mercy (*daya-rūpa*, 5.29). She takes away the pain of her devotees (*arti-nasin*, 9.29; *arti-hara*, 11.2). Hence she is the refuge (*saranya*, 11.9) of people in trouble, for she is keen on taking away the pain of those humble people who have entrusted themselves to her protection (*sarana-agata-dina-arta-paritrana-parayana*, 11.11). No evil befalls those who have come to her, and they themselves become a refuge for others (*asrayatam prayanti*, 11.29).

15. Already, in 1904, discussing the relation of *Devi-mahatmya* to the *Markandeya-purana*, in which it is now found, F. E. Pargiter (*The Markandeya Purana*, Delhi: Indological House, rep. 1969, p. vi) remarked: "The *Devi-mahatmya* stands entirely by itself as a later interpolation. It is a poem complete in itself. Its subject and the character attributed to the goddess show that it is a product of a later age which developed and took pleasure in the sanguinary features of popular religion.

16. Ramaprasada, whose hymns to the Goddess were the favourite songs of the great Bengali mystic Ramakrishna, was born either in 1718 or 1723 and died in

Though traditionally the Devi is depicted as a fear-evoking Goddess, she is more of a mother (*ambika*).¹⁷ She comes to the aid of her devotees, descending (*avatirya*, 11.40.51) upon the earth again and again in different ways.¹⁸ In all these descents she is invariably called upon to free her devotees from the menace of some demons. She is so powerful that for her the fight with the mighty demons and their great armies is not a life and death struggle but merely a play (*lila*, 2.49; 3.3; 8.30; 10.9), a great martial celebration (*yuddha-maha-utsava*, 2.54), because victory is assured.¹⁹

A Tender Mother

For Ramaprasada the Goddess is not a terrifying deity at all, but a loving mother, and so he tells her:

Mother, am I Thine eight-months [sic] child?
Thy red eyes cannot frighten me.²⁰

Even though he considers himself to be immature, he can still bully her. He has suffered so much in this vale of tears but the Goddess seems to ignore his troubles and so he threatens her:

O Mother, shall I remain just like this...?
I shall not call you Mother any more.

You have given and are giving me no end of troubles...²¹
He even tells her that she seems to be less than an earthly mother because

The word 'Mother' is soaked in affection.
The way of the world is that
When the child weeps the Mother takes it on her lap...
Wicked sons there are ever so many
But never a wicked Mother.

1775. Cf. M. Lupsa, *Chants a Kali de Ramprasad* (Pondicherry: Institut Francais d'Indologie, 1967), p. 1.

17. In the whole *Devi-mahatmya* the Devi is called *ambika* twenty-six times, *candika* being the only other name which is used more frequently — twenty-nine times. See Agrawala, pp. 254–55.

18. See also 12.32.

19. S. Anand. *Major Hindu Festivals: A Christian Appreciation* (Bombay: St. Paul's Publications, 1991), pp. 84–102.

20. Ramakrishna, *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, tr. Swami Nikhilananda (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 1947), p. 203.

21. Budhananda, p. 23.

It is not so easy to be a Mother.
 (One does not become a mother
 just by giving birth to a child.)
 To be a Mother one has to understand
 The anguish of the child's heart.²²

Thus he is trying to convince her that even if he is bad, she should not abandon him.

Tradition has it that she, who is the wish-filling tree²³, once appeared in the form of his own daughter to help Ramaprasada mend his fence.²⁴ He is so confident of her love that he dares to say:

This time I shall devour Thee utterly, Mother Kali! ...
 O Mother, I shall eat Thee up but not digest Thee,
 I shall install Thee in my heart
 And make Thee offerings with my heart.²⁵

Thus the Goddess whom Ramaprasada calls his Mother comes across to us as very compassionate (*karunamayi*) and kind (*dayamayi*).²⁶

D. Some Theological Reflections

Our examination of the Hindu tradition leaves us with two conclusions. First, this tradition is quite familiar with the idea of a God who is compassionate towards those who are in any way undergoing some suffering. The idea of a God who actually suffers with those who are suffering seems to be alien to Hinduism. We do find some stories depicting him as undergoing pain, but these are only part of a drama. It seems to me that two factors explain this reluctance to portray God as actually suffering.

A Dualistic Anthropology

It is difficult to depict one particular approach to life as the Hindu approach, but a text in the *Bhagavad-gita* is fairly representative. Arjuna does not want to fight because he realizes that his own relatives will be killed in a battle which will lead to a great loss of lives on both sides. He is filled with supreme compassion (*kṛpaya paraya*, 1.28) for them. He tries to convince Kṛṣṇa that

22. Ibid., p. 51.

23. Ibid., p. 32.

24. Ibid., pp. 25-27.

25. Ibid., p. 59.

26. Lupsa, p. 52 (hymn 35, line 1).

the war will mean not only the death of many but also the destruction of *dharma* itself. Then Krsna tells him:

You utter words of wisdom, yet you are regretting for what is not worth regretting. The wise ones regret neither for those who have died nor for those who have not. There was never a time when you or these kings were not existing. Nor will there be a time when we will cease to exist. Just as the embodied self passes through different stages like childhood, youth and old age, so too it will pass on into another body. The wise man is not pained by all this. The experience of heat and cold, pleasure and pain, results from the contact with sense-objects. It is ephemeral and so it comes and goes. Just endure it! A person who is the same in pain and pleasure and is not upset by it is fit for life immortal. These death-bound bodies are said to be of the embodied self, who is indestructible, immeasurable... He is not born, nor does he die; there never was a moment when he was not nor when he will cease to be. Unborn is he, ever-abiding, eternal, ancient. When the body is destroyed he does not perish. Just as we put away old clothes, and put on other new ones, so too the embodied one puts away old bodies and assumes other new ones (2.11-15, 18-22).²⁷

In this view of human existence, the body does not appear to be an integral constituent of human life. It is a perishable reality. The embodied self is immortal and indestructible and it is the embodied self that truly matters. Pain and pleasure do not seem to actually affect the embodied self. Hence to feel compassion for somebody, as Arjuna did, would not really become a man of wisdom.

In the *Bhagavata-purana*, however, we have the moving story of Rantideva (9.21.2b-14) which gives us another approach to human suffering. Though he and his family were going through a difficult time and living on what they received from others, yet he would give away the little he had. One morning, after having spent fortyeight days even without water, he obtained some food and drink. Just as he and his family were about to consume that food, he was approached by three hungry persons: a Brahmin, a man of low caste and an outcaste. Rantideva was deeply moved

27. Unless otherwise indicated all translations are my own.

with pity (*kṛpa*, 11) for them and gave away all the food that he had received. When he was about to drink the water that remained, just enough to quench the thirst of one person, another outcaste came and made this request: "Please give me the water. I am dying of thirst". Hearing this pathetic cry, Rantideva uttered these immortal words: "I do not ask God the highest position together with the eight superhuman powers nor even escape from rebirth. Dwelling within the hearts of all living beings, I rather make my own their pain so that they may be freed from their sorrow. By offering this life-giving water to this helpless man, anxious as he is to survive, I have overcome all my hunger and thirst, fatigue and exhaustion, sorrow and dejection, despondency and infatuation". Having spoken thus, the king, who was steadfast in his principles and compassionate by nature (*nisarga karuna*, 14) gave away even the little water he had.

While we have an heroic example of compassion in this story, the *Bhagavata-purana* too has a dualistic approach to human existence. Man is more than his body (12.5.3). It is a mark of foolishness to identify oneself with the body (11.19.42), for the body is impermanent (3.30.3), just like old clothes which fall away (1.13.24). The *jīvatman* is the permanent substratum underlying all our experiences (11.13.27). Transmigration is the result of the loss of one's real identity (4.29.62).

In his *Ramcaritmanas* Tulasidasa too articulates a similar view. Rama consoles Tara, Vali's widow: "The body, made up of five elements, is very very despicable (*ati-adhama*, 4.11.2b). It is doomed to death, but the *jīva* is eternal (*nitya*, 4.11.3b), and so there is no reason to moan the dead". This dualistic approach to human existence also explains why the *avatāra* is only an apparent man and why he cannot really suffer or experience other states of the human mind and heart. All what he does is only stage-acting.

A Dualistic Theology

The *Bhagavad-gita* informs us that there is nothing that God is bound to do, nor is he in need of anything, even then he acts (3.22), but in all this he is detached (*a-sakta*), acting purely for the welfare of the world (*loka-sangraha*, 25). In like manner, whenever there is a moral crisis the Lord is born in this world (4.7). Neither in his creative activity nor in his salvific descent is

he in any way affected (14). The *Bhagavata-purana* basically repeats this doctrine: God is totally beyond all change (8.3.8). All change belongs to the realm of *prakrti*, which is constituted by the three *gunas*. The Lord, who is himself free of all *gunas* (*nirguna*), by his *maya* assumes these for the creation, preservation and consummation of the world (2.5.18). Thus creation is totally 'outside' and 'different and distinct' from God. The pain and suffering of his creatures cannot really affect him. He is the unaffected actor (*nirvikara-kartr*), presented by the *Bhagavad-gita* as the ideal for us humans (18.26).

The idea of the unmoved mover finds a metaphorical expression: *lila* — a word used by the *Brahma-sutra*, the foundation text of Vedanta, to describe God's creative activity (2.1.33). The *Bhagavata-purana* too follows this lead. To us this universe looks so great and wonderful, but God brings it into existence by a mere act of his will, effortlessly (1.5.6). For him it is only a play (*lila*, 1.3.36; 10.24; *krida*, 10.46.40). We have noted earlier that this metaphor of *lila* is also used to explain the *avatara* of the Lord.²⁸ The idea of play brings to our mind an easy, pleasant activity, engaged upon for the fun of it. This metaphor has a certain positive content as the *Brahma-sūtra* insists: in all his activity God has no selfish motive (*prayojana*, 2.1.32). However it seems to minimize the significance of created reality, particularly of our experience of pain and suffering.

Ramana Maharshi, a very popular contemporary Hindu mystic whose roots are in the Vedanta tradition,²⁹ could be cited to illustrate what I have just stated. He was often asked his opinion about suffering. This is his advice:

You were not conscious of the world and its sufferings while asleep, but you are now that you are awake. Continue in the state in which you are not affected by such things. When you are not aware of the world, that is to say when you remain as the Self in the state of sleep, its sufferings do not affect you. Therefore turn inwards and seek the Self and there will be an end both of the world and of its miseries ... the world and its sufferings are not real.³⁰

28. See also N. Sheth, "The Child Krishna" *Jeevadharā*, xix (1989), p. 235.

29. Ramana Maharshi, *The Teachings of Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi in His Own Words*, ed. A. Osborn, Tiruvannamalai: Sri Ramanasramam, 1960, pp. 10-11.

30. *Ibid*, pp. 41-42.

If we can ignore suffering because it is not real, then the question of God suffering with us does not arise.

From Ontic Immutability to Agapeic Fidelity

Both in the East and also in the West we have taken for granted an understanding of God that starts with the presupposition that he is the perfect being and since change implies the acquiring or the loss of some perfection, there can be no change in God. It is this ontic immutability that is expressed in such words as *nirvikāra-brahman* (the changeless Brahman), and *motor immobilis* (the unmoved mover).³¹ Both the traditions have had great difficulties in reconciling this presupposition with the fact of creation. Though they have proposed different theories, none of them is totally satisfying. But if different religious traditions insist that God is really compassionate, and if compassion is not merely feeling for but also suffering with the other, then this presupposition needs to be re-examined.

Compassion implies freedom. Freedom is the capacity to determine oneself. If I am absolutely the same before and after I exercise my freedom, then it is difficult to see how I have exercised my freedom. If freedom and its exercise result in a change totally outside the agent, leaving the agent completely unaffected, then is such a freedom still a value and is that change really worthwhile? Let me put it differently. Imagine some great person telling you: "I love you deeply. Your joy is my joy, your pain is my pain. But whether I love you or not, I remain the same". What do you think of this love? What do you think of a person who claims to have such a love? Will you come to him for help when you are in need? Do you think he will adjust his plans to offer you the help you need?³² Love-songs from all over the world tell us that there is a deep longing in our gift of love—the best human expression of freedom—that it be for ever. This means that "what happens *really* matters only if it matters everlasting. [But] What happens can matter everlasting only if it matters to him who is everlasting".³³ Hence for a God who is not really affected by human joy

31. The word ontic is formed from the Greek *on* (being).

32. For an earlier discussion of this dilemma, see S. Anand, "The Trinity as God in History", *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection*, 48 (1984), pp. 167–68.

33. J. B. Cobb, "The World and God", in E. H. Cousins (ed.), *Process Theology*, New York: Newman Press, 1971, p. 168.

and pain this experience does not really matter and then the human condition becomes absurd.

It seems to me that the only way to get out of this impasse is to re-examine the traditional emphasis on ontic immutability.³⁴ We do not abandon but go beyond it by reinterpreting it to mean agapeic fidelity.³⁵ I suggest that God who is love itself, decides in complete freedom to create us, and in doing so he also creates within himself a real emptiness that can be filled only by our response. He freely makes himself vulnerable. In creating the universe he experiences a history within himself. All this sounds non-sensical, the talk of a mad man. But did not Māṇikkavāśagar often speak of Śiva as mad (*mattam*, 9.73; 17.37; 47.22)?³⁶ It is the madness of love. Hence I suggest that creation implies a real self-emptying (*kenōsis*) within the heart of God. Without this real self-emptying there cannot be real affirmation of the other as other and much less real compassion: not just feeling for the other but also suffering with the other.

I believe that in the mystery of Incarnation the divine *kenosis* receives an historical expression. Jesus is Emmanuel: God with us (Mt. 1.23). In him God comes to be with his people, even going to Egypt to share their tragic experience (2.14).³⁷ The mystery of Incarnation is "the mystery of God and the final word on reality. God draws history to himself, submerging himself in

34. This idea of the divine ontic immutability has always been a problem for philosophers even when they did not discuss the question of divine compassion. How is God the cause of the world? Can he really bring about this universe without himself changing in the process? In trying to answer such questions some thinkers or schools of thought have postulated an intermediary principle between the absolute immutable God and this contingent universe. This, however, does not solve the problem, because either the intermediary principle is identical with the absolute or is itself created. Sometimes the anxiety to save the divine immutability is so great that the impression given is that the absolute alone is real, while the world is only an illusion (*brahma satyam janganmityā*).

35. The word agapeic is formed from the Greek *agape* (love).

36. A mad person surprises us. He just does not fit in our carefully thought out and well-planned world. He is symbolic of total freedom and creativity. He can also become violent and upset all our plans and destroy our little creations. The mystery of God is more than all our neatly worked out philosophical schemes.

37. See also S. Anand, 'Some' Missiological Implications of the Concept of Incarnation, *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection*, 38 (1978), pp. 35-36; and "Universally Unique and Uniquely Universal", *ibid.*, 55 (1991), 421-422.

the horrors of that history."³⁸ An authentic lover always participates in the tragedy of his beloved. In Jesus God makes his own our hunger and thirst, our loneliness and death. With us he undergoes the pain and humiliation of being exploited and oppressed. Thus the passion of Jesus is a faint reflection of the compassion of God, a God who is faithful love. God, who freely bestowed on us the most sacred gift of freedom, himself becomes the victim of our violence when we abuse our freedom to inflict pain on others. But he refuses to be totally crushed by our violence. The crucified Jesus is the Risen Lord. Authentic compassion gives us hope: "I am really with you, and together we can go beyond this tragedy." Jesus is the 'becoming-visible' of the mysterious divine self-emptying, the effective sacrament of the compassion of God, because in him we personally experience the God of compassion.

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38. J. Sobrino "A Crucified People's Faith in the Son of God", *Concilium*, 153 (3/1982), p. 27.

Compassion: Vision and Mission Buddha's Way for Contemporary Praxis

Rosario Rocha highlights Buddha's 'passion for compassion', and explores the meaning and contemporary relevance of this 'most distinctive feature of Buddhism'. Compassion embraces the totality of reality, personal, social and cosmic. It heals the effects of suffering and transforms reality, for it is the spiritual force that counteracts greed (*thrsna*). Compassion as the power of integral liberation is the axis of the eightfold wheel of dhamma. Today we need a structural analysis of the roots of suffering in order to uphold compassion as the true antidote to all pervading consumerism and productivity drive. A theology of compassion would mean a critical reflection on Church's praxis in encountering the structures of suffering and alienation.

Which shall I praise first, you or the great compassion, which held you for so long in *samsara*, though well its faults you knew?

Your compassion, given free rein, made you pass your time among the crowds, when the bliss of seclusion was so much more to your taste. (Matreeta)¹

The first verse above alludes to the life of the Buddha as Bodhisattva.² The second refers to the forty-five years of Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha's ministry on earth after his Awakening. 'Compassion, Thy name is the Buddha', seems to be the refrain of the Poet who sees the Buddha in the world inspite of all its faults, yet choosing to dwell among the crowds. He is all praise for the Buddha's compassion, for his selfless mission. In this paper I highlight the Buddha's passion for compassion as a vision culminating in his mission, and explore the implications of such a praxis for a contextual and compassionate involvement in our times.

1. A Mahayana poet cited by E. Conze, *30 Years of Buddhist Studies, Selected Essays* (Oxford: B. Cassirer, 1967), pp. 60-61.

2. A Mahayana concept of an awakened being that postpones its own final Nirvana until it can reach out and work for the salvation of many.

Compassion of the Buddha

In the chronicles of the early life of Siddhartha Gautama we encounter the young man, son of Suddhodana and Mayadevi, living a secluded life in luxury and pleasure in the three palaces built by his father, a Sakya chieftain at Kapilavastu.³

Beyond the naivety of a protected adolescence, real life stared Siddhartha in the face. He saw the unhappy state of the human condition. His insight revealed that, whatever be the stage of their life, humans are victims of suffering.

The latter part of the second verse, cited above, hints at the inner struggle of Siddhartha whether to lead a secluded life away from the afflicted humanity, or share his spiritual discovery with the people whose folly he understood. While in such a state of mind, Brahma appeared to him and spoke thus:

Let the Blessed Lord preach the Dhamma!
May the Perfect One preach the Dhamma! ...
There will be some who will understand.

Though, initially, hesitant to share his insight, he, nevertheless, spent the rest of his life, forty-five years, passionately proclaiming the Path, the Dhamma of Compassion. He set in motion the wheel of Dhamma at Sarnath (Varanasi) in his first sermon.⁴

The insight, handed down to us in the first sermon, is commonly rendered as the Four Noble Truths. Noble is the translation of *Ariya* which means worthy. Therefore, *Cattāri Ariya Saccāni*, the scriptural reference, is more accurately translated as The Four Worthy Truths.

The first truth worth knowing is that suffering is universal. It affects every stage of life from the womb to the tomb. The second, that suffering has an origin, a cause. Third, that there is an end to this suffering by the removal of the cause. The fourth truth is praxis-oriented: the Eightfold Worthy Middle Path to remove the cause of suffering. Thus, the truths about suffering that the Buddha places before us are analytical in nature.

The chronicle of compassion would seem incomplete without mention of the fact that the Buddha was awakened to the total

3. *Anguttara Nikāya* I. 45.

4. *Digha Nikāya*, 22.

reality of the human condition in its personal and social dimensions. The compassion of the Buddha touched the various realms of the personal, namely, feelings, perceptions, consciousness, as well as the social reality. The Buddha engages suffering as a condition of life. He is "serene but not remote from the sufferer, compassionate without being sentimental".⁵

From the *modus procedendi* of Siddhartha Gautama in the context of suffering as a human condition certain insights present themselves. In his search for the *why* of this condition of life, he first sought traditional wisdom and contemporary teachers to reveal the answer to him. He approached Alara Kalama and Uddaka Ramaputta. They instructed him in the Sankhya worldview and Yogic practices. They did provide some hints at solutions, but not the proper analysis of the cause of suffering. Similarly, he held that the rigorous asceticism, he had taken to, was successful only in emaciating his body.⁶ He then set out on his own in earnest. Through meditation he was awakened to the answer to his quest — the *why* of human suffering.

The Awakened One begins the sermon that set in motion the Wheel of Dhamma with the following words:

Two extremes, monks, are not to be practised by one who has gone forth from the world. Which two? One is that linked and connected with lust, through sensuous pleasures ... The other is that which is connected with mortification and asceticism, because it is painful, ignoble and incapable of achieving the target. Avoiding both these extremes, take the Middle Path, which brings insight and knowledge, and leads to tranquillity, to higher knowledge, full awakening, to Nirvana. What is the Middle Path? The Eightfold Worthy Path.

Other details need not detain us here, except that, as virtue lies in the middle, so the passion for compassion in the life of the Buddha steers clear of extremes and generates a dynamism of its own. The awareness of the universality of suffering leads him to a universal compassion. The experience of the magnitude of suffering does not paralyze him, but challenges him to know its origin, its cause. The axis of *samsara* is *trṣṇa* (thirst, craving,

5. H. Saddhatissa, *The Life of the Buddha* (London: George Allen & Unwin 1976), p. 62.

6. *Majjhima Nikaya* 36, 85, 100.

greed, a desire drawn to extremes). The Buddha acknowledges the reality of suffering and is equally earnest to show the way out, without succumbing to the overwhelming presence of suffering. His way out is to help gain understanding by going to the root of reality. The principle of dependent causal conditioning in the Buddha's insight is a key to unlock the secret of suffering. It is generally stated thus:

When this is present, that comes to be;
from the arising of this, that arises.

When this is absent, that does not come to be;
on the cessation of this, that ceases.

On account of the presence of craving, translated as separation from the pleasant and union with the unpleasant, which in themselves do not last for all time, suffering comes into life. If craving is absent, suffering will not be present, and that too, here and now. Such was the Buddha's insightful analysis. The need for such an insight into suffering is highlighted in a story which echoes from India in all directions. The foothills of the Himalayas reverberated this story of his compassion all the way to the highest tableland of the earth, Tibet. It is the story of Kisa Gotami.

Kisa Gotami was a young woman married to a wealthy merchant in Savatthi. Her first-born child was about a year old when it fell ill and died. The grief-stricken mother left no stone unturned in her search for a medicine that would restore her child to life. One of the persons she approached asked her to see the Buddha, then camping at Jetavana, who would perhaps perform the miracle. She approached the Awakened One, placed the child at his feet and made her request. The Master listened to her with patience and compassion. He then said to her: My sister, there is only one way to heal your affliction. Go down to the town and bring me back a mustard seed from any house. It must be from a house where there has never been a death.

She was elated and set out for the town. She stopped at the first house and made her request. She was told that many people had died in that house. She went from house to house and before long realised what the Buddha had intended her to know, that death comes to all. She returned to the Teacher and picked up her child's body to be cremated. The Buddha asked her, 'Have you brought the mustard seed?' 'No', she replied, 'nor shall I try

to find them any longer. Now I understand the lesson you were trying to teach me. My grief made me blind, and I thought that only I had suffered at the hands of death'. Then the Awakened One led her to understand the rest of the Dhamma of compassion. Wherever her story is narrated the compassion of the Buddha is proclaimed.

Compassion as Vision

The way of the Buddha was a vision for his followers. Compassion became the horizon of that vision. The early followers of the way taught that the nature of all things, including humans, is not so much a being as a becoming — a coming to be. In fact, becoming suggests a dynamic process as opposed to a static one. One becomes more and more compassionate, more free, more loving and more equanimous. Mrs Rhys Davids rightly appreciates that Buddhism gave the moral code of India 'a worthy positive form' wherein 'the moral life raised to this higher power was for every man the Way of Becoming ...'⁷

The *Pāṇca-sīla* (the moral code) of Buddhism articulates this vision of compassion for all hearers of the Buddha's word (*śrāvakas*) in a positive programme of action. It is not merely an aversion (*veramāṇi*) to taking life, as an immoral act, but relinquishing force and cherishing compassion and good will for all beings. Similarly, not taking by force what is not given (stealing) is positively to be content with what one has acquired honestly. Not to lie, slander, or abuse is a challenge to be truth-speaking, peace-making, gentle and speech worthy. The avoiding of wrong sexual behaviour is a challenge to respect every woman and treat her with courtesy and trust. The avoiding of toxic substances is to be in control of one's will in right thinking, speaking and action.⁸

The Eightfold Middle Path is the way of the Buddha for the removal of the cause of suffering. Its eight aspects have their foundation in compassion. Therefore, the horizon is laid out as *sīla*, *samādhi* and *pañña*. *Sīla* (virtuous conduct) is in right speech, right action, and right living; *samadhi* (meditative concentration) in right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration;

7. Mrs C. A. F. Rhys Davids, *Outlines of Buddhism: A Historical Sketch* (London: Methuen, 1934), pp. 29–30.

8. See Mrs Rhys Davids, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

and *panna* (wisdom, deeper insight) in right understanding and right intention. Pali Buddhist sources add the fourfold *Brahma-viharas* (or 'God-abidings') to the challenging praxis of compassion. The praxis suggested here is of contemplation that vibrates with universal friendliness (*metta*), compassion (*karuṇā*), joy (*mudita*) and equanimity (*upekkha*) towards all. The moral code, the Eightfold Middle Path and the four universal virtues are the horizon for human interaction in the world. They are meant to eliminate the cause of suffering, when practised conscientiously by individuals and community. Compassion is one of the four universal virtues in that praxis, which Edward Conze has quite aptly described as 'social emotions'.⁹ Compassion connects us not only to human beings, but to the whole world.

In the Vinaya Mahavagga (Kh. 8) we have the Compassionate One's touching encounter with a certain monk who was sick with dysentery and lay fouled up in his own urine and excrement. The Buddha came upon him while visiting the monastery with Ananda. When he saw him lying there, he went up to him and asked, 'Brother, what is your sickness?' 'It is dysentery.' 'Have you no attendant?' 'No', replied the monk. 'Why do the monks not look after you?' 'I am of no use to the bhikkhus, Master; that is why they do not look after me.' Then the Master said: 'Ananda, go and fetch some water. Let us wash this bhikkhu.' The Master poured the water and Ananda washed the bhikkhu. Then the Master and Ananda put him on a bed.

On that occasion the Master summoned the Bhikkhus and asked them why they did not look after him. Their response was that he was of no use to the Bhikkhus. The Buddha, then, spoke thus: Bhikkhus, you have neither mother nor father to look after you. If you do not look after each other, who will look after you? Let him who would look after me look after one who is sick. If he has a teacher, his teacher should as long as he lives look after him until his recovery. Or his companion or his pupil, or one who has the same teacher should look after him. If he has none of these, the community should look after him. Not to do so is wrongdoing.

It is on individuals and the community (Sangha) that the Buddha enjoined the task of realising the vision of Compassion.

9. Edward Conze, *Buddhist Thought in India* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1962), ch. 6.

Mission of Compassion

The mission command of the Buddha to the community is of paramount significance. It is good for us to be familiar with the same. In the Vinaya Mahavagga¹⁰ the text reads:

The Lord said to the Bhikkhus, I am delivered, O Bhikkhus, from all fetters, human and divine. You, O Bhikkhus, are also delivered from all fetters, human and divine.

Go now, O Bhikkhus, and wander for the welfare of many, for the happiness of many and out of compassion for the world, for the good, for the welfare, and for the happiness of gods and human beings ...

Preach, O Bhikkhus, the dhamma, which is good in the beginning, good in the middle and good in the end, in the spirit and in the letter. Proclaim a consummate, perfect and pure life of holiness ...

And I will go also, O Bhikkhus, to Uruvela to Senanigama. in order to preach the dhamma.

The Pali text is evocative of the mission of compassion. The monks are commanded to go out for the well-being / welfare of many (*bahujanahitaya*), for the happiness of many (*bahujanasukhaya*), out of compassion for the world (*lokanukampaya*). The purpose of the mission is set out in these three phrases. Most of us may be familiar with *karuṇa* as the word for compassion generally used in Buddhist scriptures. It is not mentioned in the mission command. Instead we have *anukampa*.¹¹ Etymologically, it refers to a condition of 'being moved' (*kampa*) in accordance with or in response to (others or situations — *anu*). Elsewhere in the Pali scriptures we find the expression: *sabbapana-bhuta-hita-anukampin* (one who is moved with compassion for the welfare of all humans, and of all life).¹² In elucidating the Buddhist concept

10. For the Pali text, see *The Vinaya Piṭakaṁ*, Vol. I. Mahavagga, Hermann Oldenberg (Ed.) (London: Luzac, 1969), I, 11:1. The translation of T. W. Rhys Davids and Hermann Oldenberg is published as *Vinaya Texts*, Part I in the Sacred Books of the East Series, Volume 13 (Varanasi: Motilal BanarsiDass, reprinted 1968) pp. 112–13. For a brief form critical comparative study, see George M. Soares-Prabhu, 'Two Mission Commands.' *Biblical Interpretation* 2, 3 (1994), pp. 264–282.

11. Harvey B. Aronson has rendered it as sympathy in his book, *Love and Sympathy in Theravada Buddhism* (Delhi: Motilal BanarsiDass, 1980). *Pāli Tipiṭakaṁ Concordance* Part III (London: Luzac, 1953) p. 138, gives the root meaning of *anukampati* as to pity.

12. *Sanyutta Nikāya* IV.314; *Anguttara Nikāya* II.210.

of love, *anukampa* has been understood to suggest 'vibrating towards or after'.¹³ In the context of the first moral principle, namely, to abstain from taking life, familiar to us as Buddhist *ahimsa*, *anukampa* is portrayed as a positive virtue, 'that is, having abstained from all sorts of harmful behaviour toward living beings, one is modest, possessed of tender qualities and is well disposed and sympathetic towards all beings'.¹⁴ In the Mahayana tradition, Buddhahood or liberation of an individual is said to be 'ultimately meaningless' if it does not urge him to a 'wholly selfless compassion for others (*karuna*) which in turn leads to concern for their spiritual welfare'.¹⁵

The most distinctive feature of Buddhism, Theravada or Mahayana, is its praxis of compassion. It is the goal of the Buddha's own ministry and mission command to his disciples. We need to ponder now on the implications of such a praxis for a contextual and compassionate involvement in our world.

Compassion as Contemporary Praxis

The Buddha's quest was to understand the *why* of suffering. The aetiological stories incorporated in the paper have given us an insight into the passion for compassion in the praxis of the Teacher. The method of the Master is part of that insight. The causal principle serves as the starting point. We understand that compassion is a vibration movement towards the suffering of others. The presence of suffering as an overwhelming reality is hardly missed in contemporary India. So the praxis of compassion is a crying need of our people.

The first step in this contemporary praxis is a proper analysis of the cause of suffering. The Buddha analysed the personal feelings, perceptions and consciousness, as well as the social and cultural aspects of the cause of suffering. In the complex modern situation a comprehensive analysis of the cause of suffering would entail the personal, societal and structural aspects of life. Persons

13. C. A. F. Rhys Davids, "Love (Buddhist)", in *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, J. Hastings (ed.), 8: 159–62.

14. Digha Nikaya I, 4, 63: *sabbapāṇabhuta — hitanukampa* as cited under *Anukampa* in *The Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, Vol. I (Colombo: Government of Ceylon, 1961–65), p. 742.

15. Nakamura Hajime, "Bodhisattva Path", *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, Vol. 2, Mircea Eliade (Ed.), (New York: Macmillan, 1987), p. 266.

suffer on account of their likes and dislikes, attachments and alienations which influence their feelings, perceptions and consciousness. Buddhist meditation aims at an insight into the personal inner impulses which may be at the root of personal suffering.

The societal nature of the cause of suffering is generally attributed to the caste system in India. In a fast growing and economically upward mobile society, with reference to the middle class in India today, the socio-political and economic dimensions would in themselves not exhaust the source of suffering. Wider policies that affect the rural-urban divide as well as traditional-modern outlooks on culture and society would have to be added to the communal or religious divide that plagues contemporary Indian citizens more than ever before.

Finally, within each community, structural analysis of rituals and doctrinal prescriptions of religion would have to be made if we are to understand their liberative power or otherwise. Just as the Buddha's insight into the cause of suffering, available to us in the Four Worthy Truths, is analytical, so too the contemporary praxis of the search for the cause of suffering would have to begin with a thorough analysis.

The second step in this praxis is 'back to reality'. The story of Kisa Gotami is enlightening, because she realized what the Buddha wanted her to understand. Besides, there is a tendency in humans to consider their experiences, mostly of suffering, in isolation. 'Back to reality' was the pedagogy of the Buddha to remove her alienation. She is part of the dynamics of life. She sees it and is freed of her isolationist grasp of suffering.

Similarly, the utilitarian perspective in the care of the suffering monk is castigated by the Master. In the contemporary capitalist economy, utilitarianism is seen, by some at least, as the bedrock of success. It is also the root of much suffering. One is useful as long as one is a productive member of society, in terms of work. The Buddha opens the eyes of the monks to the intrinsic worth of a person. Compassion is not a recompense for production.

The Buddhist morals regard the whole world as the domain of the Buddha's compassion and not merely human beings. The vision and mission of the Buddha is enjoined upon 'liberated beings'. The mission command is explicit about it: 'You, O

Bhikkhus, are also delivered from all fetters, human and divine. Go now...' Therefore, compassion, according to the Buddha, is the field of the awakened persons.

The pedagogy of the Buddha incorporates a critique of contemporary philosophies and spiritualities that were self-centred as well as unconcerned. He moved away from the dualism of Sankhya philosophy that suggested the non-involvement of the Puruṣa in the suffering of Prakṛti. He disdained the self-indulgence of materialists, as well as the self-negating asceticism as extremes. He advocated a different spirituality that would go to the whole world by the Middle Path of compassion. The universal compassion that was the vision and mission of the Buddha led him and his followers to reach out to the suffering world.

Conclusion: towards a Theology of Compassion

How do the vision and mission of compassion affect us, Christians, as we encounter Buddhism? It must urge us on towards a theology of compassion in praxis.

Christian charitable institutions are involved in a lot of relief work in India. Aloysius Pieris summarizes the Christian experience of Buddhism as love meeting wisdom. He deals with the missionary character of compassion (*karuṇā*) quite significantly for our discussion and highlights the complementarity between '*prajñā* (Skt for gnosis) and *karuṇā* (the Buddhist approximation to agape)' to be the 'two constitutive dimensions of Buddhahood'. He elaborates on *karuna* as 'compassionate involvement in the release of suffering beings'¹⁶.

In such a context, the immediate consequence of our reflection on the compassionate involvement, following the Buddha's pedagogy, would be to undertake an in-depth, comprehensive analysis of the causes of the suffering of those we serve. Such an analysis would break new ground for a contextual theology of compassion. It would focus on the three aspects: personal, societal and structural.

A theology of compassion would have to address the contexts in which contemporary persons find themselves as victims of suffering — oppressed, exploited and marginalized. Suffering

16. Aloysius Pieris, S. J., *Love Meets Wisdom: A Christian Experience of Buddhism* (Maryknoll, N. Y.: Orbis, 1988), pp. 12; 155.

inflicts personal psychological wounds which hurt. A theology of compassion would have to deal not only with the rational aspect of persons but also with the cause of psychic wounds at the level of personal feelings, perceptions and consciousness (the *prajna* aspect). The urgency for such a theology to be in dialogue with the advances in psychoanalysis cannot be gainsaid.

The societal dimensions of suffering, enumerated earlier, pose an added challenge to a theology of compassion. Compassion is not a cosmetic quick-fix. Christian relief work and aid is not a lasting solution. Christian collaboration is certainly needed to remove the causes that plague society. Theology would have to scrutinize the societal causes of suffering. It would do a commendable service in its critique of the political, economic and social consequences of public policies, whether they promote universal welfare or add to the universal burden of more oppression and injustice.

In a global situation, the earth is threatened by the gaping hole in its ozone layer. The resources of the earth suffer exploitation at the hands of profit-hungry humans. In such a context the welfare of the earth and its inhabitants would have to be the urgent and holistic concern of the theology of compassion.

Compassion poses a challenge to ritual, cultural and doctrinal structures, that may not be liberative, within a community. In the Eightfold Middle Path the Buddha maintained that right livelihood is one of the ways to remove the cause of suffering. It was his criticism that the priestly class earned its living by peddling promises of liberation through the offering of sacrifices. A theology of compassion would have to address itself to the true nature of hope cherished by human beings.

A theology of compassion, in the context of inter-religious dialogue in India, would serve as a second stage of dialogue between communities that are already involved, in the struggle for peace, justice, equality and liberty for all first stage. It is reassuring that involvement together with others would bring us 'back to reality'. It would be a move away from the isolationist tendencies, sometimes noticeable, in our commitment. Such an inter-religious theology of compassion will find itself to be a prophetic voice in the world of suffering.

Jesus: a Flesh-Translation of Divine Compassion

Samuel Rayan offers a penetrating meditation on Jesus the compassionate. He shows how with 'overflowing sympathy Jesus enters our brokenness and blasts the fetters one by one'. The christian community sees in Jesus 'God's compassion translated for us in the idiom of our own flesh and blood, our fragility and brokenness, our freedom, our lovability and our respons-ability in regard to God, our fellow-humans and the rest of creation'. The compassionate face of God turned to humanity in Jesus Christ is a grace as well as a call to be compassionate to the suffering people and to be creative in removing the structures of suffering.

1. The Face of Jesus

The New Testament collection of writings carries many images of Jesus. The portraits vary. Their differences represent the nuanced critical reflections and responses of believing communities/authors as they brought their Jesus-experience face to face, in earnest dialogue, with their concrete historical situations. The diversity of images shows how, in changing conditions of conflict and suffering, christians experienced Jesus as saviour. It shows too how to early christians Jesus made a difference. Faith-commitment to him had transformed their vision of the world, their outlook on life, their sense of values and their priorities. It had given them new tools and norms with which to assess the worth of things eagerly sought after or carefully shunned by many in thoughtless moments. From their faith-encounter with Jesus christians had gained a new sense of life's direction and meaning. The many faces of Jesus reveal how his followers were enabled in varied settings to opt for the victims rather than for the owners and managers of death-systems. The multiple portrait of Jesus indicates how Jesus came across to different communities as they strove to live the faith in diverse contexts with distinct predicaments and problems.

But the many images are not without common features: All of them tell of a critic of religion and society who re-interpreted

many a law, many a tradition, in favour of life and freedom, or set them aside if they were found unfit for human use. All the pictures introduce to us a friend of the common folk, especially of the downtrodden and the broken. All point to a suffering Son of Man who was contradicted, rejected, betrayed and killed. The Passion is a common trait. Common too is the compassion of God who raised the crucified Jesus to newness of life and incomparable glory; and common is the compassion of Jesus. His Passion is his Compassion.

We are going to contemplate the compassionate face of Jesus, watch his merciful hands, and regard his understanding attitudes and approaches to people. We shall heed his deeds and words of compassion. We intend to take note of the way they grow transparent to disclose the lineaments of God's face and hands and heart, the configurations of God's own wondrous compassion.

2. The Compassion of Jesus

Mark's Gospel opens with the theme of compassion. Jesus comes to the Jordan in the company of "everybody from the region of Judea and the city of Jerusalem. They were assembling to hear John, to confess their sins and get baptised. Jesus comes too and gets baptised himself (Mk. 1: 4-9). Here is a 'movement' on the part of Jesus "into the experience of the other (the crowd) to be present in solidarity and communion of experience". That is compassion. Here Jesus shows "sensitivity, vulnerability to be affected by the experience of the other. That is what compassion implies. It implies also remedial action and involvement in the situation" (Hellwing:121). From the beginning christians took note of this move of Jesus and confessed that the Son of God came "in the same human nature as any sinner in order to do away with sin" (Rom. 8: 3); that God made Christ one with sinful humanity, "made him share our sin in order that we, in union with him, might share God's righteousness" (2C. 5: 21); and that Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law 'by becoming a curse for us', making himself answerable for the curse (Gal. 3: 14; cf. Dt. 21: 23; Isa. 53).

Mark does not refrain from suggesting that in this solidarity-compassion of Jesus, something beautiful of the Divine Compassion is also unveiled. As Jesus came out of the water, heaven opened up; the Spirit, like a dove, descended on him; and a Voice called

him, 'My dear Son'. If the Son is so compassionate as to become solidary with sinners, the Father must be the more so. The words of the greeting, 'Son, Beloved', are significant; so is the symbol of the cooing gentle dove (Mk. 1: 9-11).

There follows a period of testing of Jesus in the desert (Mk. 1: 12-13). Matthew and Luke elaborate the 'temptation' into a whole drama in three acts (Mt. 4: 1-11; Lk. 4: 1-13). Luke suggests that the testing was not over with the end of Jesus' desert sojourn. It punctuated Jesus' life all along till it culminated in the ordeal of Calvary. Hints of the continued testing may be spotted in Peter's protest against the odds of Jesus' passion and death (Mk. 8: 11-33); in Jesus' family's attempt to hold him in (Mk. 3: 20-21, 31-35); in the pressure they put on him to seek publicity (Jn. 7: 2-8); in the Pharisees' demand for heavenly signs (Mk. 8: 11-13; Mt. 16: 1-4; Lk. 11: 16-30; 12: 54-56); in people's decision to take him by force and make him king (Jn. 6: 14-15); and in his enemies' taunt daring him descend from the cross (Mk. 15: 29-32). This readiness to be part of our human condition so surely tried in so many ways is the essence of compassion. Gethsemane and Calvary are its culmination.

The letter to the Hebrews dwells lovingly on the trials Jesus underwent. It distils their meaning as solidarity-compassion, and spells it out in sensitive terms of tenderness. Jesus was for a short while made lower than angels so that he could die for all humanity. In bringing many children to glory, God made Jesus perfect through suffering. Jesus calls us sisters and brothers, and so he and we have the same Father; and the children are people of the same flesh and blood. Jesus has become like us sharing in our human nature in order to die and thereby destroy both death and the devil.

"This means he had to become like his brothers/sisters in every way so that he could become a compassionate and trustworthy high priest... And now he can help those who are tempted / tested because he himself was tempted and he suffered" (Hbr. 2: 9-18).

Our high priest then is 'not incapable of feeling our weakness with us'. He has been put to the test 'in exactly the same way as ourselves' apart, of course, from sin. We may therefore approach the throne of mercy with confidence and obtain mercy, find grace,

secure help (Hbr. 2: 15-16). The trials of Jesus, his passion and compassion and its saving fruits are all summed up in a touching passage in Hebrews:

"During his life on earth, Jesus offered up prayers and entreaty with loud cries and tears ... he won a hearing by his reverence, and he learned obedience through his sufferings. And when he was made perfect he became for all who obey him the source of eternal salvation" (Hbr. 5: 7-10).

3. The Reign of God

Jesus began his ministry with the proclamation of the Reign of God. He proceeded to present the reality of the Reign in services to people, and bring it within the range of their experience in exorcisms, healings, feedings, fellowship with outcasts, re-interpretation of laws, setting aside of inhuman conventions, upholding of life and its rights, and standing people face to face with the radical demands of a loving and merciful God who is close to everyone and is willing to reign over the people and help shape their history into something gentle, beautiful and happy (Mk. 1: 14-3: 6).

The proclamation of God's Reign implied a criticism and rejection of prevailing dominations, be it the temple and its priest, be it the empire and its Caesar. Those dominations had done little to alleviate the many forms of misery which afflicted the people and which Jesus was beginning to deal with. The powers that be had probably aggravated the wretchedness, or even had been its cause. At Jesus' life-affirming entrance into the scene, the establishments felt threatened. The question of the demoniac as early as Mark 1:24, 'Have you come to destroy us?' echoes the anxiety of the establishment.

Jesus, however is liberating the man, the people, from their alienated condition; from the reduction of their selfhood to the state of being pliant tools in the hands of the powerful, mere echoes of their hollow purposes (Mk. 1:21-28; Lk. 4: 31-37). Mark's narrative forges ahead illustrating how, with overflowing sympathy, Jesus enters our brokenness and blasts our fetters one by one. Follow him, for instance as he goes in where Simon's mother-in-law lies feverish; and watch him as he takes her by the hand and lifts her up. She is well now, on her feet, serving people (Mk. 1: 29-31).

That evening all the sick and the possessed were brought to him. 'The whole town came crowding round the door', and he "healed many who were sick with all kinds of diseases, and drove out many demons" (Mk. 1: 32-34). Then a leper came to Jesus, knelt down and begged for help. "If you want you can cure me", he said. "I want", Jesus replied. Note how quickly the answer comes, and watch how Jesus is filled with pity, how swiftly his hand reaches out and touches the leper, and how complete the healing is. Can we sense in that spontaneous gesture and ready response a wave of the compassion that saturates his heart? (Mk. 1: 40-45; Mt. 8: 1-4; Lk. 5: 12-16).

In Mark 2: 13-17 the compassion of Jesus tears down class walls and caste barriers and all elitist pretensions, and goes ahead building comradeship with 'outcasts' and 'sinners', and rebuilding the honour and pride of the marginalised and the despised—to the chagrin, of course, of the rulers and the provocation of the establishment. Jesus defends his new moves with firmness. He is like a doctor who cares for the sick even when those who think they are well may not care for him. His sympathies are with the pariahs of society and religion, and not with their overlords. Matthew's version of Jesus' reply to his critics agrees with the prophets in assigning primacy to mercy, love and compassion over religious rituals, liturgies and sacrifices. "Go and learn the meaning of the words: 'Mercy is what pleases me, not sacrifice'." (Mt. 9: 13; 12: 7; Hos. 6: 6; Isa. 1: 10-17).

Matthew refers again to this mercy-saying (of Hosea and Jesus) in the story of the disciples' plucking of corn on a sabbath day and eating it (Mt. 12: 1-8; Mk. 2: 23-28). The disciples did this because they were hungry, just as David and his men, when hungry, ate the bread of offering, by law reserved to priests. In both cases the law stands fulfilled, not violated. For the sabbath and all laws and institutional arrangements are for the good of people, and not the other way round. They must yield to human needs and human possibilities. Mercy-compassion and justice have precedence over sacrifice and clerical claims.

The point is pressed home in the next story in Mark (3: 1-6; Lk. 6: 6-11; Mt. 12: 9-14). Another sabbath, and we are in a synagogue. Jesus is present. A man with a crippled hand is part of the assembly. Some people, eager to accuse Jesus of doing

wrong, are watching him closely. Let us regard him too as he directs the cripple to stand in front, and then puts a question: 'What is lawful on the sabbath? to help or to harm? to save someone's life or to destroy it?' No answers are forthcoming. Jesus' critics know it is a sticky question. We watch Jesus' eyes begin to glow with anger: we watch his face suffuse with sorrow for a people so stubborn, so wrong. Now he heals the man. For Jesus life comes first. And for that his enemies plot to take his.

4. Life

Healing and feeding are privileged places for the revelation of Jesus' compassion. There is the restoration to sanity of a man, symbol of a nation, occupied by 'Legion', and deranged as a result, and dehumanised (Mk. 5: 1-20; Mt. 8: 28-34; Lk. 8: 26-39). There is the woman suffering from a haemorrhage who literally pilfers healing and wholeness from the hem of Jesus' clothes. Jesus made her faith known, called her, 'My daughter', and wished her peace (Mk. 5: 25-34; Mt. 9: 20-22; Lk. 8: 43-48). And there is the raising to life and health of Jairus' twelve year old daughter. We watch with wonder Jesus' motherly concern directing the child's parents to give her something to eat (Mk. 5: 21-24, 35-43; Mt. 9: 18, 23-26; Lk. 8: 40-42, 49-56). In Tyre Jesus sets free from an evil spirit the daughter of a Phoenician woman. Near the lake of Galilee he opens the ears and sets loose the tongue of a deaf and dumb man to the joy and amazement of the people (Mk. 7: 24-37; Mt. 15: 21-28). At Bethsaida Jesus takes a blind man by the hand, puts spittle on his eyes, places his hands on him and restores his eye-sight (Mk. 8: 22-25). After his transfiguration Jesus liberates an epileptic boy from a deaf and dumb spirit (Mk. 9: 14-21; Mt. 17: 14-20; Lk. 9: 37-43). There is then the blind Bartimaeus of Jericho whose cry for mercy Jesus hears and answers by making him well (Mk. 10: 46-52). In Matthew's version there were two blind men (Mt. 20: 29-34; Lk. 18: 35-43). Matthew and Luke tell of the healing of a servant of a Roman officer whose faith delighted Jesus (Mt. 8: 5-13; Lk. 7: 1-10). The healing of a crippled woman is an exclusively Lukan story. The woman was sick for eighteen years, bent over and unable to straighten up. "When Jesus saw her, he called out to her, 'Woman, you are free from your sickness!' He placed his hands on her and at once she straightened herself up and praised God" (Lk. 13: 10-17).

The story of the raising of a widow's son is also special to Luke. At the gate of the town of Naim Jesus met a funeral procession. A young man had died. He was the only son of a woman who was a widow. "When Jesus saw her, his heart was filled with pity for her. He said to her, "Don't cry". He walked over to the coffin. The men carrying it stopped. Jesus said, "young man, get up, I tell you". The dead man got up and began to talk. And Jesus gave him back to his mother" (Lk. 7: 11-17). A beautiful revelation of the compassion welling up in the heart of Jesus as he walks amid the shadows of our world.

This story is matched by John's account of the death and raising of Lazarus of Bethany. When Jesus saw Mary, the dead man's sister, weeping, and the Jews who were present weeping also, "Jesus was greatly disturbed, his heart was touched, he was deeply moved, and with a profound sigh" he asked where his friend was buried. "Jesus wept". The Jews said, "See how much he loved him". Deeply moved and sighing again, Jesus reached the tomb, had the stone at the opening removed, lifted up his eyes, gave thanks to God and cried in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out". When the dead man came out, Jesus asked the bystanders to "unbind him and let him go free" (Jn. 11: 28-44).

That is not the only time we see Jesus in tears. Look and listen as he laments over Jerusalem. "As he came in sight of the city, he shed tears over it." He wept over the city's refusal to recognize its way to peace, and the time when God came to save it. "Jerusalem, Jerusalem", he wept, "how many times I have longed to put my arms around all your people, just as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you would not let me!" Jesus loved Jerusalem as a mother loves her child. He yearned for her, but has been rebuffed. His love laments her tragic fate. "Now your home will be completely forsaken ... No longer can you see the day needed for peace ... Your enemies will surround you with barricades ... not a stone will they leave in its place ..." (Mt. 23: 37-39; Lk. 13: 31-35; 19: 41-44).

Does that not remind us of the compassionate tenderness Jesus had for children? Some people brought their babies, their little children, to Jesus for him to touch them. But the disciples scolded them. That made Jesus angry. "Let the children come to me", he said, "do not stop them. The Kingdom of God belongs

to such as these". He called the children to him, took them in his arms, embraced them, placed his hands on each of them and gave them his blessing (Mk. 10:13-16; Lk. 18:15-17; Mt. 19:13-15).

5. Bread

Eating together and sharing food with the poor were choice times for Jesus' rich humanity to expand, and his heart's warmth to radiate. Once Jesus went with his friends to a lonely place for some solitude and rest. The people found out the venue, and a crowd gathered. "When Jesus ... saw the large crowd his heart was filled with pity for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd. So he began to teach them." When it was getting late his disciples suggested that the people be sent away to go to nearby villages and buy themselves something to eat. Jesus' approach was different. "You yourselves give them something to eat", he answered. Were the disciples to go and buy two hundred dollars' worth of bread and feed the multitude? No, said Jesus. No recourse to the market and its Multinationals. Manage with your own resources. They had at hand five loaves and two fish. These Jesus took with thanksgiving, and broke and gave for distribution among the people. Everyone ate, and had enough, and much was left over (Mk 6:30-44; Mt 14:13-21; Lk 9:10-17; Jn 6:1-13). Was it a multiplication of loaves, or of generous hearts and compassionate sharing? Both; and they always go together.

In a second account of the same or a similar event, Mark shows Jesus as taking the initiative, with the words: "I feel sorry for these people; they have been with me for three days and now have nothing to eat. If I send them home without feeding them they will faint as they go, because some of them have come a long way" (Mk 8:1-10; Mt 15:32-38). In John too (6:5-6) it is Jesus who takes thought first for the people as also in Mark 5:44 for the child to be fed. Jesus' table-fellowship with outcasts could be recalled at this point (Mk 2:15-17; Mt 9:9-13; Lk 5:27-32 and John 4:7-10). Remember also the warm breakfast of fish and bread which the Risen Jesus, motherlike, got ready for her 'children' returning from the sea after a night of labour in the cold. "Come and have breakfast", Jesus invited them in right motherly fashion, with maternal compassion (Jn 21:1-14).

The Eucharist that Jesus gave us too is couched in mother language, maternal imagery and motherly gestures. At the farewell supper Jesus held up bread and said, Take and eat, this is my body, my self, given for you: precisely what every mother says implicitly to her baby for some two years and more from the moment of its conception. So too what Jesus said, holding up the cup of wine: This is my blood, shed for you, drink and live. Jesus is reported to have said earlier: "I am the bread of life...I am the living bread...The bread I shall give is my flesh... my flesh is the real food, my blood is the real drink...whoever eats me will live because of me". The eucharist is mercy; it is the sacrament of life and life-giving relationships. It is patterned on mothers' self-giving and blood-shedding for the life of the world. Its language is the silent idiom of motherhood and of maternal compassion.

6. Forgiveness

Particularly revalatory of Jesus' measureless compassion are two accounts of his dealings with sinning women. One day as he was having dinner in the house of Simon, a Pharisee, a city prostitute broke in, bringing with her a jar of perfume. She stood behind Jesus where he was reclining, by his feet, and cried, and wet his feet with her tears, and dried them with her hair, and kissed them and poured the perfume on them. Simon was shocked at Jesus' evident acceptance of this woman's devotion. Jesus tried through a parable to re-educate him to new understanding and to elementary compassion. Great love and great forgiveness go hand in hand, he was told. This woman was an example. Then Jesus said to the woman: "Your sins are forgiven. Your faith has saved you. Go in peace" (Lk 7:36-50).

The other instance of forgiving compassion is the story of a woman who had been caught committing adultery. The leaders and teachers brought her to Jesus. The law condemned her to death by stoning. What was Jesus' stand? As they pressed him for a reply, he said, "Let the one among you who is sinless be the first to throw a stone at her". Nobody dared to; they left one by one. Neither would Jesus condemn her; she may go, but she should sin no more (Jn 8: 1-11). If we fix our gaze on yesterday's sins and yesterday's laws, we shall have

little to offer the guilty except death; and that would be neither religion nor humanity (2 C. 3:6). If we fix our eyes on the heart of God and see the sinner there, as Jesus does in the story before us, we can make a fresh offer of life. God's eye does not get glued to the dead past or the dead law. His view soars to the virginal future which even this adulteress can have through his forgiving grace.

Forgiveness, not punishment and death, is central and decisive. God's forgiveness embraces and carries the world, and permeates life. But its personal appropriation and experience is conditioned on the pardon and peace we, women and men, share among ourselves. "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." (Mt 6:12; 18:23-35). That is the message of Jesus. But how many times ought I to forgive my offending brother? Up to seven times? No, says Jesus; not seven but seventy-seven times/ but seventy times seven (Mt 18:21-23).

7. Mercy

Deeds of mercy/compassion are illumined by words of compassion and mercy. Jesus' parables of mercy are well known. One is the famous short story of the Samaritan. A victim of robbery and violence lies stripped, wounded and half-dead on the roadside. Some religious people, a priest and a levite, come that way, see the man and pass by without rendering him any aid. May be, they pass by for reasons of religion and ritual purity. Then came the Samaritan. At the sight of the half-dead victim of banditry on that Jericho road, the foreigner "was moved with compassion". He broke journey, dismounted, went up to the broken figure, poured oil and wine on his wounds, and bandaged them, and took him to the inn and cared for him. The story is defining who is a neighbor, and what is love of neighbor; it is also telling us who Jesus is, where he may be found, what his mission is, and the mission of the disciples (Lk 10:29-37).

The primacy of mercy and the mystery of compassion are illustrated in three parables in Luke 15. They were told to counter the complaint of hard, legal religionists that Jesus was welcoming sinners, eating with outcasts, and associating with the dregs of society. The critics must know that every shepherd goes after the missing sheep, and on finding it, takes

it on his shoulders and joyfully brings it home and celebrates the occasion with his friends. So does a woman who has lost a coin or a wedding ornament. She searches for it carefully, and rejoices with her neighbors when it is found. So does the father of the lost son. While the boy was still a long way from home his father saw him; his heart was filled with pity; he ran; he threw his arms around his son and kissed him. And he gave orders that his son be clothed in fine robes and his return celebrated with a great feast. Such, the parables are saying, is the message and mission of Jesus. Such, they are saying, is God.

The point is made explicit in John 10. Jesus is the good shepherd. Unlike thieves and robbers who come only to steal and kill, and unlike hired men who flee when the wolf attacks, the good shepherd defends his flock, lays down his life for them if need be, and leads them to rich pastures and cool streams. Such committed concern and compassion can speak in motherly accents to all who labour and are overburdened, and say to them reassuringly, "Come to me, and I will give you rest" (Mt 11:25-30).

8. In Brief

Matthew sums it up for us :

"Jesus went all over Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the Kingdom, and healing people from every kind of disease and sickness... People brought him all those who were sick with all kinds of diseases and afflicted with all sorts of troubles: people with demons, and epileptics, and paralytics — Jesus healed them all" (Mt 4:23-24).

"He continued his tour through all the towns and villages, teaching and proclaiming the good news of the Kingdom and curing all kinds of disease and illness. And when he saw the crowds he felt sorry for them because they were harassed and dejected, like sheep without a shepherd." (Mt 9:35-36)

"He drove out the spirits with a command and cured all who were sick. This was to fulfil what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah: 'He himself bore our sicknesses away and carried our diseases' ". (Mt 8:16-17)

9. The Identity of Jesus

The story of Jesus, then, is a story of compassion. His

hands are full of it, his eyes stream with it, and from it are woven all his relationships. How did Jairus' child remember Jesus all her life except as caring and thoughtful compassion? And how did all the healed people, and the forgiven women, and the challenged truth-seekers and the crowds that ate bread from his hands image him to themselves except as warmth of affection and as power at the service of mercy? In this dark and broken world of hunger, misery and tears the truth of Jesus is compassion. Compassion is his name.

Jesus is clear about his own identity. Clearer than we are. He persists in affirming that what he is, what he has, what he says, whatever he does is not from himself. It is all from another whom he fondly calls Abba, dear Father. Jesus' identity is not known apart from his roots in the Father's heart. This is the confession and witness of the Son:

He who comes from heaven tells what he has seen and heard.
The one whom God has sent, speaks God's own words
(Jn 3:32-33).

My teaching is not from myself: it comes from the One
who sent me (Jn. 7:16).

Anyone who is prepared to do what God wants
will know whether my teaching is from God
or whether I speak on my own authority (Jn 7:16-17).

What I declare to the world I have learned from him (who
sent me).

What I say is what the Father has taught me.

What I speak is what I have seen at my Father's side...

(I have) told you the truth as I have learned it from God.
(Jn 8:26-28,38,40)

I have not spoken of my own accord, but the Father who
sent me commanded me what to say and what to speak,
and I know that his commands mean eternal life.

And therefore what the Father has told me is what I
speak (Jn 12:49-50).

Jesus' words of compassion and caring, of forgiveness
and reassurance are God's words. But not only Jesus' words
and teaching, his deeds too and his services originate in God.

In all truth I tell you: by himself the Son can do nothing;
he can do only what he sees the Father doing:
and whatever the Father does, the Son does too (Jn 5:19).

Jesus is tracing to the Father all his healing and life-giving activity; and all his judging and forgiving services (Jn 5: 17-30).

The works I do in my Father's name, by my Father's authority, speak on my behalf; they are my witnesses...

If I am not doing my Father's works, there is no need to believe me; but if I am doing them, then even if you refuse to believe in me, at least believe in the works I do (Jn 10:25, 37-38).

The Father who remains in me does his own works (Jn 14:10).

Not only Jesus' words and deeds go back to God, but his very Self and Person spring from the depths of God and remain rooted there even as he branches out into our world. Here is his witness:

I have not come of my own accord:
but he who sent me is true... I know him,
because I have my being from him (Jn 7:28-29).

...believe in the work I do, then you will know for certain that the Father is in me and I am in the Father (Jn 10:38). Whoever believes in me, believes not in me but in the one who sent me; and whoever sees me, sees the one who sent me (Jn 12: 44-45).

Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father.

Do you not believe that I am in the Father
and the Father is in me?

What I say to you I do not speak of my own accord: it is the Father living in me, who is doing these works (Jn 14:8-11).

One could echo Jesus and add: whoever experiences my compassion, experiences the compassion of the Father who sent me and is in me.

10. Metaphors

From early times Jesus' disciples drew certain conclusions from the experience they have had of their crucified and raised Master. They fashioned many a metaphor in an attempt to interpret his meaning for themselves and others. They encountered Jesus as the Word of God, as something God was/is saying to them, a Word about God's own Self and about us humans and our world and history and destiny. They knew him as God's

Word of love and forgiveness, compassion and peace spoken into their hearts and lives. A life-giving Word at the foundational level of creation and the crowning Word at the level of redemption (Jn 1:1-3).

For the disciples Jesus was "the Image of God", "the exact Likeness of God's own Being" (Col 1:15; Hbr 1:3). As such, "Jesus represents God to creation" and creation to God. He "opens up earth to heaven and heaven to earth". His ministry of redeeming the fallen created order into obedience to God consisted actually in "the exercise of the true Image and Likeness of God" (Gunton: 100). His ministry of compassion which we have briefly traced is such an exercise. Jesus then is the Image of Him whom Paul blesses as the All-merciful Father, the God who gives every encouragement, and supports us in every hardship, and helps us in all our troubles, and thus enables us to help and comfort those who have all sorts of trials and sufferings (2 C 1:3-4). He is the Image of the God "who raises the dead" (2 C 1:9). He is God's comforting Hand, God's consoling Word, incarnate Compassion (cf 2 C 7:4-7; Isa 40:1).

Jesus is the Image of him who loved the world so much as to give it his only Son for its salvation (Jn 3:16-17). The Image of One who gives his sunshine and showers of rain to all women and men, all creatures, regarding only their need and not their worth or merit (Mt 5:43-48). The Reflection and Radiance of Him who feeds the birds in the sky which do not sow or reap or gather into barns; and who clothes in incomparable splendour the wayside flowers which never have to work or spin (Mt 6:25-34). The Image of One whose care and concern keeps count of the flight and fate of every sparrow and who has every hair on our head counted, and sees to it that not a single hair will be lost (Mt 10:28-31; Lk 21:18-19).

Jesus is the Image of Yahweh who comforted Israel, leading her into the desert and speaking to her heart, and betrothing her to himself in justice and love and tenderness without end (Hos. 2: 14-25; cf. 11 and 14: 5-10). Image and Likeness of Yahweh who consoles his people, speaks to the heart of Jerusalem regretting the double punishment she has been meted out, feeding his flock, gathering lambs in his arms, holding them close to his heart, and leading to their rest the mother ewes (Isa. 40: 1-11). Image of Yahweh who soothes his people with healing words:

I did forsake you for a moment, but in great compassion I shall take you back ... in everlasting love I have taken pity on you. My faithful love will never leave you ... I shall lay your stones in agates and your foundations in sapphires and make your battlements rubies" (Isa. 54).

We recognize in Jesus the expression of His Heart who stopped by infant Israel / frail humankind as she lay in the field on the day she was born, in her blood and dirt, unwashed, unwanted, uncared for, and who in great pity said to her, "Live", and saw to it that she grew and developed, became rich and beautiful, clothed in His own splendour (Ezk. 16: 1-14).

Of all such loving compassion on God's part to which the Bible and creation and our experience bears ample witness, Jesus is the expression, the incarnate presence, the guarantee and the seal.

11. Heart/Womb

Scholars point out that the biblical word for compassion, sympathy, pity, mercy, derive from a stem (*rehem, rehamim/splanchnon*) denoting internal parts of a sacrificial animal, and later, the womb in particular, considered to be the seat and centre of tender affections. Basically the word suggests motherly feelings, mother's love, the bond that unites those born of the same womb. Attributed to God, the suggestion is that God's love is familial: Yahweh is father / parent to Israel:

When Israel was a child I loved him; I called my son out of Egypt ... I was like someone lifting up an infant to his cheeks, and ... I bent down to feed him (Hos. 11).

Yahweh is mother to Israel:

Can a woman forget her baby at the breast,
feel no pity for the child she has borne?
Even if these were to forget, I shall not forget you.
Look, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands ... (Isa. 49: 15-16).

Yahweh is husband to Israel:

Do not fear, you will not be put to shame again ...
You will no longer remember the dishonour of your widowhood.
For your Creator is your husband ...
I did forsake you for a brief moment, but in great compassion
I shall take you back ... in everlasting love I have taken pity on
you (Isa. 54: 4-8; Hos. 1-3).

God welcomes back the rebellious child, the faithless wife. He does so with overflowing yearning, forgiveness and love. The basis of this tender mercy is the covenant God has made with his people. God expresses and maintains this covenant fidelity in concrete outward acts within history. Its chief manifestations are individual and national forgiveness, deliverance from enemies, fulfilment of promises, restoration of exiles, and provident care of the people. For us the crowning concrete manifestation in history of God's loving kindness and compassion is the Jesus Reality, that definitive disclosure of God's fondness for our earth.

Jesus lived the mystery of divine compassion by his swift and generous response to human needs and sufferings. To describe this response the New Testament uses the word *splanchnizomai*, to be moved in one's bowels / womb / inward parts. Coming across human sorrow and need, Jesus is moved in depth, in his bowels, in his womb (Mt. 9: 36; 14: 14; 15: 32; 20: 34; Mk. 1: 41; 6: 34; 8: 2; Lk. 7: 13). It seems natural then that Jesus should liken himself to a hen seeking to gather her chicks, or to a woman in labour; or to a mother fixing breakfast for her children, or even as bread of life which a mother's body becomes for the life of her children (Mt. 23: 37; Lk. 13: 34-35; Jn. 16: 20-22; Jn. 6: 15, 50-58; Lk. 22: 19-20). For the letter to the Hebrews, it is his capacity for motherly compassion that qualifies Jesus as, and consecrates him high priest of the new dispensation (Hbr 4: 14-16; 2: 17-18; 5: 7-10).

12. The Challenge

Jesus is God's compassion translated for us in the idiom of our own flesh and blood, our fragility and brokenness, our freedom, our love-ability, and our response-ability in regard to God, our fellow humans and the rest of creation. Within this perspective an entire Christology could develop. Minika Hellwig, author of *Jesus, The Compassion of God* (1983) suggests that "the most persuasive representation for a Christology for our times would be that of Jesus as the incarnate compassion of God" (Hellwig: 121).

The Incarnation of the Word is compassion in that it brings God to our side, to pitch his tent among us, to become Immanuel. It is an image of the self-emptying of the Divine to take on the image of the enslaved human with a view to restoring the divine image in us (Rom. 8: 29; Phil. 2: 6-11; 2 C 3: 18; Col. 3: 10). Incarnation is identification with the dispossessed and the discarded,

the victims of death-systems (Mt. 25: 31-46); and that is compassion. Henceforth what is done to the least of human beings is done to the person of Jesus, Son of Man, Son of God.

The Cross is compassion — the revelation of the broken Heart of God who makes his own the pain of his earthly family. Calvary is divine self-identification with every kind of historical suffering and humiliation. In Jesus God now knows the soreness of our wounds and the saltiness of our tears. He now knows what it means to tread life's path with weary feet and a heavy heart. So He understands. Hellwig sees Jesus standing his ground

"in the witness he personally had to give as speaking the compassionate and longing word of God into the human situation; and for this he was crucified. But he spoke the compassionate Word of God into the world in all the truth of its non-violent respect for the free response of those who were not yet ready to respond, for it was only his death which set free in them the power to respond" (Hellwig: 106-107).

Jesus' Resurrection is compassion. The resurrection means that Jesus "redeems the situation of hopelessness by being there, because where he is is after all not quite hopeless". In radical compassion "he enters into our situation of fear and frustration", accompanies us to the bitter end and effects a breakthrough. "This many-faceted compassion of Jesus offers the key to the Resurrection ... The Resurrection of Jesus is above all else the revelation and realization of God-with-us, and the token of it is that the presence of Jesus has become interior to our consciousness, interior to our freedom, not doing things for us as we remain passive but empowering us" (Hellwig: 107-108).

An interpretation of Jesus as God's Incarnate compassion will stand in faithful continuity with the Word God has spoken to India / Asia in the past and the present in such persons as Gautama the Buddha, Gandhiji, Mother Teresa, Medha Patkar and millions of hidden anonymous women and men of compassion and kindness who are committed to life, to its wonder and its sacredness, and to its endless non-violent possibilities. We stand challenged by Hellwig's conviction that "Gandhi has personified the divine compassion in our times to an extra-ordinary degree that echoed the life and ministry of Jesus in unmistakable terms" (Hellwig: 155).

Hellwig is right in holding that "to speak of Jesus as the compassion of God is to reflect on contemporary Christian praxis and on the realization that the following of Jesus in our times confronts us constantly with human suffering on a massive scale" (Hellwig: 121). The power and presence that can transform this situation and its structural causes is that of the Risen Christ and 'its quality of compassion'. It is "in the total self-gift of his compassion (that) Jesus acts most divinely" and becomes most imitable even when he is risen from the dead. In fact "to be a follower of Jesus means ... to enter by compassion into his experience, with all that it expresses of the divine and the human" (Hellwig: 108). We are most devout and closest to Jesus not when we avoid involvement in public and conflictual situations, but when "we share deeply in his own intimacy with God and therefore find ourselves drawn into the divine Compassion in practical and effective ways wherever there is suffering of whatever kind. Where the suffering is an unnecessary burden of unjust structures in society, the compassion shows itself as effective challenge" (Hellwig: 154).

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The Vulnerable God - a Meditation on the Cross

Sebastian Painadath looks at the Cross as the language of the divine self-revelation. The Crucified Christ reveals the vulnerability of God and the risen Christ reveals the creative power of God's transforming love. Emmanuel — God is with us as the God who suffers with us and thereby transforms our life into the new life manifest in Christ.

The paradox of the Cross

We all have an inborn idea of God, a sort of dictionary definition of God: God is almighty, all-knowing and all-pervading, Creator of everything and Lord of all, ultimate source and final goal of our life. In God we live and move and have our being.

World religions communicate through a rich variety of symbols the experience of this God. Philosophy describes the reality of God in terms of Being-Itself, *sat-chit-ānanda, motor immobilis, mysterium tremendum et fascinosum*. With all that we have a well-rounded image of God, a beautiful picture of God: God is the fulness of being and truth, goodness and love, beauty and power. And we contemplate this almighty and fascinating God either 'beyond the heavens' (in utter transcendence) or 'deep within the cave of the heart' (in utter immanence).

With this beautiful image of God let us go up the hill of Calvary. There we stand before a man who hangs between heaven and earth. The heaven has apparently forsaken him, for he cries out: My God, my God, why have you forsaken me! The earth has abandoned him, for all his close friends have left him alone at this moment of agony. The transcendent God above the heavens does not seem to respond to his cries, and the God within the cave of the heart does not seem to wake up. Here is a man who undergoes the deepest suffering of human beings and utter loneliness.

With the eyes of faith we look deep into his tearful eyes, his bloodstained face and confess: this is God's face turned towards

the world. When we do that all the powerful images of God crumble and all the beautiful pictures of God turn into dust. Here we are confronted with the paradox of faith in the crucified God: We conceive an almighty God, but the Cross reveals to us a God who is weak and feeble. We imagine an all-knowing God, but the cross unfolds the foolishness of God (I Cor. 1:25). We look up to heaven in search of the transcendent God, but here God meets us on the blood stained paths of this earth. We meditate on a God resting within our heart, but God encounters us in the struggles of human life.

It is convenient for us to conceive a God who is enthroned above our heads as the Lord of all; but in Jesus God meets us as a slave waiting to wash our feet. It is fascinating to contemplate God as the absolute beauty permeating the entire creation; but in Jesus God encounters us in the wounds of beings, in the woundedness of the mother earth.

We always think of an almighty God who has the power to remove all sufferings from this world within a moment; but on the cross we meet a God who himself becomes prey to the deepest suffering of human beings. We often ask, why God does not intervene to block the cruelties of human beings on others; but the cross shows how God himself has become a victim of human cruelty.

In our frame of mind God the Lord of history is above history, for he is beyond change and suffering, but the crucified God is God within history. We meet God on the evolutionary paths of our life, stained with blood and tears, shaped by sweat and toil. The God revealed in the crucified Jesus is not the *motor immobilis* of the philosophers, but the Emmanuel, God-with-us in this valley of tears.

God's being is becoming! God's action is passion. God is a suffering God. This is the mystery and message of the Cross.

God suffering? How to reconcile the two? Human mind cannot in any way predicate suffering to God. This is something like trying to draw a circular triangle. Either circle or triangle, either God or suffering — both cannot go together! At this point human logic and philosophy stop its pursuit of reason. Yes, it is 'unreasonable' to look at the crucified face of Jesus and discover there the face of the suffering God. Paul perceived this when he

said: "The crucifixion of Christ cannot be expressed in terms of philosophy. The language of the Cross is illogical..." (I Cor. 1: 17). Yet this is the valid way of perceiving the depth of the divine mystery. It is the way of the paradox, the way of *coincidentia oppositorum*.

The two basic notions of God

Paul speaks of two basic types of God-seekers: the wise persons and the pious people. Those who claim to be wise contemplate a God who is the fullness of being, the source and object of wisdom. The way to know this God is the philosophical pursuit of reason. But in reality God is beyond reason's comprehension. "As Scripture says, I shall destroy the wisdom of the wise and bring to nothing the learning of the learned. Where are the philosophers now? Where are the teachers of the Law? Where are any of our thinkers today? Do you see how God has shown up the foolishness of human wisdom? It was God's wisdom that human wisdom should not know God" (I Cor. 1: 19-21). In pursuit of human wisdom one tends to conceive God as the omniscient Absolute; but the Cross reveals the apparent foolishness of God! This is unacceptable to philosophers; they would call it utter nonsense, folly and madness. Yet waking up in faith to the foolishness of God revealed in Christ is the specificity of christian faith.

The second type of God-seekers is the pious people, who in their popular forms of piety worship a God who is almighty: God has the power to intervene in the lives of people and events of history in a miraculous way in order to alleviate suffering and recreate life. Hence through devotional practices people pray ardently to this God to work miracles and to bring about healing. They will not believe 'unless they see signs and portents' given by an almighty God (Jn. 4: 48). Their religious quest cannot be satisfied by a God who revealed his weakness on the cross, for he could not miraculously 'come down from the cross' (Mt. 27: 42). For them therefore the message of the cross is disappointing: absolute scandal, 'an obstacle that they cannot overcome' (I Cor. 1: 23). Yet waking up in faith to the weakness of God revealed in Christ is the specificity of christian faith.

Paul invites us constantly to look at the face of the crucified Christ, in whom God's face was unveiled unto humanity. "The

only knowledge I claim to have is about Jesus, and about him as the crucified Christ" (1 Cor. 2: 2). "The only thing I can boast about is the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Gal. 6: 14). The Cross of Christ is the language of God's self-manifestation. It is not merely a historical event of God's timebound participation in human suffering, but the revelation of a deep mystery of the divine reality: the wound of the crucified Christ is the revelation of the woundedness in God; the suffering of Jesus on the cross is the expression of the suffering in the inner-trinitarian life of the Divine. Crucified Christ is the embodied manifestation of *theopathy*. "The death of Jesus is a statement of God about himself" (Karl Rahner).¹

Love makes God vulnerable

It has been often said: reason waits outside the gate, when love enters! Love is perhaps the only valid key for a deeper grasp of the mystery of God's suffering. Genuine love makes the lover vulnerable in relation to the beloved. An invulnerable person cannot love at all. Love is sustained by affectivity, i.e., one is deeply affected in encountering the beloved. Love therefore involves change, evolution, becoming, historicity. The unmovable mover cannot really love us, because love does not move him at all. An 'almighty' God cannot really love us, because he does not need us, nor is he affected by our brokenness. Only of a God who is vulnerable, and who really suffers, can it be said: God is Love. "God suffers with us far more than we suffer: we suffer for ourselves, God suffers for us" (Meister Eckhart).²

A scene from our daily life may illustrate this mystery of love. The parents at home suddenly get the news that their daughter met with a traffic accident. How would the parents react to this? If they remain unaffected by the news it is evident that they do not really love their child. Parental love would impel them to put aside all other concerns and rush to the place to attend to the wounded child. The parents share the pain of the child. The entire family suffers with the suffering child. It is in this co-suffering that love enfleshes itself.

If God is love, God suffers with us. When there is such an amount of poverty and sickness, oppression and exploitation, violence and criminality of which millions are victims, can we think of God unaffected by all this suffering? Image of an invulnerable almighty God is a gruesome image of God. A God who has the

omnipotence to intervene and yet refuses to get involved in the tragic predicament of humanity is a cruel God. Is it not this God of whom many God-seekers say, God does not exist? Atheism contains a valid critique on the ungodly images of God. When Jesus cried on the Cross in deepest agony, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me', did he not really experience himself being forsaken by the 'almighty God', whose omnipotence should have helped him 'come down from the cross'? At the same time Jesus experienced himself being loved and accepted by the 'Father God': 'Father, into your hands I commit my spirit' (Lk. 23: 46). The God whom Jesus revealed is not so much the God of might as the God of love, not the God of omnipotence but the God of compassion: "'the gentle Father and the God of all consolation, who comforts us in all our sufferings, so that we can offer others, in their sufferings, the consolation that we have received from God ourselves'" (II Cor. 1: 3-4). "'When the crucified Jesus is called the 'image of the invisible God', the meaning is that *this* is God, and God is like *this*. God is not greater than he is in this humiliation. God is not more glorious than he is in this self-surrender. God is not more powerful than he is in this helplessness. God is not more divine than he is in this humanity'" (J. Moltmann).³

What we experience in the crucified Christ is the truth that God suffers with us when we suffer, because God loves us. Jesus Christ is the enfleshing of the suffering God, the revelation of the wounded love of God, the incarnation of the compassion of God. Jesus Christ is the embodiment of the motherliness of the Divine (Lk. 13: 34). Only an affectionate mother can tell the child: 'come and drink from me' (Jn. 7: 38). The divine fountain of life and love unfolded itself in Jesus Christ and hence he has become for us the well from which we can drink the water of divine Spirit" (Jn. 4: 14; 7: 9). "'Jesus symbolises the heavenly mercy which makes all human suffering its own'" (Tagore).⁴

The compassion of Jesus

The life of Jesus has been a living testimony of God's compassion for the suffering people. He understood his call in terms of 'bringing good news to the poor, proclaiming liberty to the captives, giving new sight to the blind, setting the downtrodden free and proclaiming the Lord's year of grace' (Lk. 4: 18-19).

He lived with the poor and for the poor; he invited them to his table-fellowship and broke bread-his life-with them. The sick, the broken-hearted, the blind, the cripple, the marginalised, the lepers, the exploited women, the forsaken children ... these were close to his heart. He called them 'blessed', for they were to experience God's compassion and inherit the new Kingdom. Suffering of people is the divine milieu in which Jesus communicated the experience of God's love. Jesus relativises creed, cult, code, community and all forms of religion in favour of concern for the suffering human beings (Lk. 10: 29-37, Mk. 3: 1-6, Jn. 5: 1-19, 8: 1-11).

The suffering God continues to reveal his face on the wounded faces of the suffering people. God identifies himself with the suffering humanity: "I was hungry, I was thirsty, I was a stranger, I was naked, I was sick, I was in prison ..." (Mt. 25: 35-36). Only from the mouth of a vulnerable God can these words be heard. Faith in the crucified Christ is a call to perceive God's presence in the wounds of human persons. In this sense the crucifixion of Christ is not just an event of the past, but a reality of the present. It is an invitation to look at the world and society with the eyes of the God-with-us.

Through the parable of the wounded father (Lk. 15: 11-32) Jesus describes the vulnerability of God the Father. When the younger son left the father's home he left a wound in the heart of the father. The father felt the pain of the son's departure because he loved the son. To love someone means to respect the freedom of the other and be prepared to be wounded by the other. Ever since the son left home the father was a wounded one. With a wounded heart he waited for the son's return. Father's unfailing love kindled fire in the heart of the son and he returned. Jesus describes dramatically how passionately and unconditionally the father welcomed the son back home. The deeper message of the story is that God like a wounded father waits for the homecoming of all to the divine fatherly home. Until 'God will be all in all' we can only speak of a suffering God, not of a God in glory.

Sin and Suffering

What is the cause of suffering in God? This is the unfathomable mystery of the 'depth of the Divine'. Biblical revelation tries to unfold this mystery fragmentarily in terms of human freedom.

When God created the universe he found everything good, and the creator rejoiced in his creation. With the creation of the human pair God's ecstatic joy reached a climax, because 'God created male and female in the image of himself' (Gen. 1: 27). God endowed the human persons with freedom to respond to his admonition on the 'tree of knowledge'. In realising this freedom the human pair responded in disobedience to the creator, and sin entered creation causing alienation in humanity ('original sin') and suffering in the entire creation. Did God the creator remain unaffected by the sinful disobedience of the human persons? If God's creation is the outflow of his love, he cannot but be affected by the reality of alienation and suffering in creation. "In his mercy God suffers with us, for he is not heartless" (Origen).⁵ True lover suffers the suffering of the beloved. The image of God that emerges in the subsequent books of the Bible is that of a vulnerable God: a God who 'walks with his people', 'takes them in his arms' as the father carries his child, 'writhes in pain' like a mother giving birth to her child, suffers like a husband whose wife left him, gets angry and yet relents, feels remorse over punishing his people ... (Is. 1: 2-4; Jer. 4: 19-22, 31: 20, 42: 10-11; Hos. 2: 1-3; 3, 11: 1-8). In fact the parable of the wounded father (Lk. 15: 11ff) offers us a key to understand the mystery of God's suffering, which is caused by God's unconditional love in creating human beings in freedom and by the manifold ways in which human persons tragically misuse this freedom.

Meaning of Resurrection

Does this mean that the entire purpose of God's creation is thwarted by the misuse of human freedom? Is human history tending towards a total tragedy? The answer to this existential theological question is given in the Resurrection of Christ. Cross reveals the vulnerability of God. What does Resurrection reveal?

The scene from our daily life depicted above may be helpful here. If the parents rushing to the child who met with an accident are so shocked by the event that they spend the whole time grieving over it, the child is not helped. The parents would rather take the wounded daughter to the hospital, get proper nursing and medical attention in order to ensure that the child gets back to normal health. Love participates in the suffering of the other, and takes the initiative to remove suffering.

Love re-creates what is destroyed and assembles what is broken asunder. Love brings in peace and instils hope. Love heals wounds and brings hearts together. Love enables one to forget the offences and forgive the other. Love opens the eyes to see the future always brighter than the past. Love has infinite horizons. Love is creative. It creates everything anew, ever new.

This creative dynamics of God's love has been made visible in the Resurrection of Christ. "The old is gone; everything is made new!" (II Cor. 5: 17). God's Spirit is at work in our midst, not only suffering with us, but also bringing about a new creation in all realms of life. God's Spirit 'reconciles everything in and through Christ' towards the state when 'God will be all in all' (Col. 1: 20; I Cor. 15: 28). The entire creation is being progressively made transparent to the transforming presence of the Divine (Rom. 8: 18-11). Within us and all around us there is a universal process of theophany: divine Light shining through everything. On the risen body of Christ we are graced to perceive this theophany, this total transparency of creation to Creator. Thus Resurrection gives us an assurance that the world is moving towards final fulfilment in the Divine. Resurrection engenders in us hope to await 'the new heaven and new earth, the place where righteousness will be established' (II Pet. 3: 13). Hope gives rise to courage and vision. Hence the farewell words of Jesus: "Fear not, I am with you always until the end of time!" (Jn. 14: 1; Mt. 28: 20).

Resurrection gives us new eyes to see the world as the milieu in which the Kingdom of God takes shape in all realms of life. All our creative initiatives get thereby a divine horizon of meaning. Teachers enkindling light in the minds of students, nurses caring for the sick, social activists bringing about justice and harmony, farmers toiling to produce food for the hungry, factory workers giving shape to things needed for a better living, scientists exploring the mysteries of reality ... all who are committed to shaping a more humane and just society take part in the divine work of reconciling this world to God. Their spirituality consists in unfolding the sacred dimension of the secular.

Resurrection is the manifestation of the power of God, not the power of the omnipotence, but the transforming power of love. God's love transforms our life not by imposing itself on us, but by participating in our struggles and sufferings. Emmanuel — God is

radically with us in our sufferings, and in our creative endeavours as well; God is with us as the crucified and risen Lord. Crucifixion and Resurrection are not just historical events of the past, but salvific realities of the present. They are the ongoing revelation of the vulnerability and creativity of God's love, expression of *theopathy* and *theophany*. In this sense the crucifixion of Christ continues in the sufferings of people, and the Resurrection of Christ still takes place wherever the world is created anew.

Look deep into the wound of a wounded person and confess, my Lord and my God! — this is christian enlightenment. Get involved in the initiatives of integral liberation and feel, God is with us — this is christian commitment.

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God's Suffering as the Principle of Creation

Guenther Schiwy raises a radical question on the traditional Judeo-Christian concept of the almighty God. Why did not the almighty God 'block the annihilation of masses of people'? Why did he create this gruesome world at all? Schiwy reflects on the deeper dynamics of creation. The God who creates the world in freedom and love is no more an almighty God, but a God who 'accepts limitation on himself and thus experiences suffering'. Love manifest in creation makes God really 'limited' and vulnerable. *Creatio est passio Dei.* Love alone transforms suffering into participation in the creative life of God.

Albert Schweitzer in his book first published in 1935, *Die Weltanschauung der indischen Denker*, attributes to the Western thought a positive attitude to world and life while he describes the Indian thought in terms of an attitude that negates both. However through the horrible acts of the second world war, especially the cruel attempt to eradicate the Jewish people in the concentration camps of Germany, every optimism for progress in the West seems to be shaken to its very foundations. A pessimistic attitude to life spreads widely which is compensated by excessive materialism.

Why suffering?

In the western religions, especially among Jews and Christians, this negative experience of the world reaches its climax in the question regarding the responsibility of God for suffering in the world; this is particularly the case when the so called 'natural' course seems to be exploded through suffering and death conditioned by the laws of evolution and heightens into the indeterminate. Auschwitz and Hiroshima are the terrible examples. In the traditional Jewish-Christian faith God is compassionate and almighty at the same time. Why then did God not block the annihilation of masses of people at least by turning the events from within if not through an external intervention? Or, should not have God refused to call to life such a deteriorated creation if he cannot prevent the incredible crimes human persons commit in relation to others including animals and nature at large? In the western philosophy and theology the old 'theodicy problem' surfaces with a new relevance: how to justify the existence of an evidently compassionate, almighty and all-knowing God face to face with the disproportionately immense suffering in the world.

The traditional response is that God gifted human persons with freedom to choose good or evil in order that they can cooperate in the unfolding of creation and in the realisation of their salvation. This position however cannot any more have credibility because the price paid for this freedom is the holocaust of millions of human persons. To say that God could still create

something good out of this evil is terribly cynical when confronted with the immensity of suffering. Still worse is the position that demands that one should see in these horrible events the punishment of a just God. The understanding of theologians and the unflinchingly pious people seems to be the most acceptable, that is, God, even the Father-God of Jewish-Christian faith, is *fascinans* and yet *tremendum*, inaccessible mystery, surpassing our powers of mind and heart, before which the silence of the creature is the only appropriate attitude.

However critical questions on the traditional image of God are not out of place. If according to Jewish-Christian conviction there is a revelation of God, it makes sense only if the human person can with all his limitations understand God's Word especially God's Word about Himself. When one reads the Bible in view of understanding the meaning of suffering in creation one is reminded of the outcome of the four Truths on suffering preached by the Buddha in his first sermon at Varanasi: the Truth about the immensity, origin, dissolution and cessation of suffering is for the Buddha the absolute wisdom, the only Light that matters. This is true of the biblical revelation that culminates in the crucifixion of Jesus the revealer.

God's Self-emptying

The significance of this 'historical' Good Friday for the understanding of suffering in creation and for the theodicy question does not seem to have been exhaustively reflected upon. The philosophers of German idealism, especially Schelling and Hegel, had already pointed out that creation was caused through a suffering act of God. God takes upon himself a limitation in favour of creation, not out of weakness but strength, not due to necessity but in freedom, not through playful arrogance but with love. 'The beginning of creation is the condescension of God; he descends into the real and shrinks into it. But there is nothing disgraceful for God in this.' (Schelling, *Stuttgarter Privatvorlesung*, 1810). While creating something distinct from himself God, not only allows limitation on himself and thus experiences suffering, but also hands over himself into creation as its inner dynamic principle, and suffers everything that happens in the process of creatures' evolution. God immerses himself so deep into creation that it might appear that 'God is dead'; this imagery is found in a Lutheran hymn and Hegel comments on it in his 'Philosophy of Religion' as follows:

"This is the expression of a consciousness that the human, the finite, the feeble, the weak, the negative aspects are actually a divine element itself, that the otherness, the finiteness, the negativity is all within God and not outside God. The otherness, the negativity is perceived as a moment of divine nature itself."

Hegel understands the 'historical' Good Friday on which according to christian faith the incarnate Son of God died on the Cross as the real-symbol for the truth of the 'speculative' Good Friday.

'God is dead' — this means that God does not make use of his omnipotence, omniscience and omnipresence for the period of creation's evolution in such a way that he would not control the process of history from 'outside' by applying non-creaturely, miraculous means. God subjects himself to the laws of nature and morality, both of which have actually their origin in the creative act that continues to sustain in existence. This creative act means doubly an act of suffering for God: He limits his divinity and subjects himself to the laws of creation. Thus suffering becomes the central category of reality, the condition for the possibility of creation through God and of God's becoming creaturely. This speculative theology of suffering is central to the biblical revelation as documented in the Letter of Paul to Philippians, 2: 5-8. Kenosis, self-emptying, has also been the key-word for several christian theologians, the Kenosians, who have always upheld the suffering of God as the central faith perspective in interpreting suffering in creation.

Jewish theologians, especially those of the mystical tradition of Kabbala, have also projected suffering of creation onto God Himself. According to Isaak Luria (1534-1572) the first step of God in the act of creation has not been extrovert, but introvert, a movement of God into Himself, a self-folding of God within and unto Himself. The existence of creation is made possible through a process of shrinking in God. Hans Jonas, the Jewish philosopher of religion (1903-1993), in his book 'Das Gottesbild nach Auschwitz' further tries to reflect on the self-emptying of God into creation in order to understand the inexplicable non-interference of God in Auschwitz, where Jonas' mother was killed. God exposes himself totally to suffering, which only gets multiplied with the process of evolution and through the growing freedom of creatures.

Not an Almighty God

Hans Jonas believed that with this theological perspective the original question of theodicy has been solved: God himself has renounced any form of external interference of omnipotence that would remove the boundless suffering of creatures and of God himself. *An Almighty God does not exist* — neither within nor beyond the world, who would pursue from a distance the history of the world or interfere in it as a corrective force. There is only the Divinity that bears creation like an embryo within its womb, nurtures it and remains fully in solidarity with its creatures in all their possibilities. God's suffering is not merely suffering with the creation-in-agony, but his own suffering in all creatures. Therefore God does not have to justify why he as the Almighty did not

prevent the suffering of the innocent. The creatures must first justify why they let others suffer so much, though they should know by the grace of the indwelling God that only the suffering that is inflicted through love is divine; to let someone suffer out of hate is antidivine.

The question posited at the outset still remains: should not have God refused to take the risk of creating the world that is full of suffering, which human beings inflict upon themselves and the rest of creation? When the history of creation is understood in terms of a history of the love of the creator for his creation one could ask whether the price paid for God's 'adventure of love' has not been too high. The theodicy question thereby gets a new sharpness. It is true, God does not have to justify why he does not interfere in the history of creation because God has renounced this possibility in favour of the freedom of human persons; the human persons have to bear the responsibility for inflicting suffering in the world. Still God has to justify why he brought forth this creation as it really exists for there is an apparent uncertainty regarding the success of this branch of evolution, which our earth unfolds.

Solidarity with others

At the beginning of this article we referred to the perception of Albert Schweitzer on western and Indian attitudes to life. It raises a question regarding the orientation towards practical life from a positive or negative approach to life and world. This question basically arises from the theory that 'no ethical principle is to be found in the event of the world or in the primal Ground of being'. On the basis of the explanations given above we are at variance with this theory. Goethe a non-theologian has already been quoted by Schelling in connection with his 'categorical imperative' (to borrow the term of Kant): "The one who aims at great things must make serious efforts; in restraint unfolds the master". If what Schelling said of God is true, 'contraction is the beginning of reality', it must be true of creation too. Self-limitation, self-restriction, renunciation, self-giving unto death are virtues which create life. "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it brings no fruit at all" (Jn 12: 24). Creation owes its life to the self-limitation of God. Hence creation will survive only when creatures pursue their creator, and hold themselves back, by leaving room for others. Tolerance is part of this strategy of ethical life, the purpose of which is to restrict one's own space and make room for others, and for the otherness of oneself. When we do that we participate in God's suffering, which is actually the price for our life and the requisite for our survival.

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(translated from German by Sebastian Painadath)

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